

Art program engages adults with dementia

Painting will soon be offered to nonprofit's at-home clients.

By Vivienne Machi
Staff Writer

HAMILTON – An existing partnership between Community First Solutions' Colonial Communities and Miami University that brings the artist out of residents with dementia is making its way to another group of the nonprofit's clients – in their homes.

A painting program for residents of Berkeley Square and Westover continuing care retirement communities suffering from a decline in mental functions will soon be offered for Colonial At Home clients, via a pilot program that trains caretakers to engage their clients artistically.

Opening Minds through Art (OMA) was first developed with Miami Universi-

ty's Scripps Gerontology Center in 2007, according to Miami professor Dr. Joan Fopma-Loy, and in 2011 received the Best Practice Award from LeadingAge Ohio. Miami University students volunteer each semester to work one on one with residents of Berkeley Square and Westover Homes, Colonial's two continuing care retirement homes in Hamilton in creating works of art.

"The goal is to further the autonomy and dignity of adults with dementia," Fopma-Loy said, adding that those suffering from the decline in mental capacities are often deprived of meaningful interaction. She said that the program is beneficial for the students as well. "They have the experience volunteering, which helps them develop close relationships," she said.

The program's developer, Dr. Elizabeth Lokon, and Fopma-Loy realized that this program needed to extend to peo-

ple who were restricted to their own homes.

"We thought of the number of home care providers and population of aging people in homes and isolated seniors at home," she said. Fopma-Loy wrote a grant last year to fund training for at-home caretakers through the Ohio Long-Term Care Research Project, and reached out to Colonial At Home to help with the pilot.

Colonial At Home Director Amy Wylie said the nonprofit was "a natural match" for the pilot.

"The advantage for us is they provide an amazing training opportunity for our staff on dementia care," Wylie said, adding that at least half of the agency's incoming clients suffer from dementia.

"We really want to set ourselves apart as an agency that specializes and focuses on dementia care," she said.

She said the program fits into Colonial At Home's philosophy of "helping people age at home," and helps to assist with the loneliness that clients with dementia may feel, as their caretakers become more than laundry helpers or cooks, but partners in painting. The grant provides art kits for caretakers to bring into the home that includes smocks, canvases and even foam build-ups that assist their clients in gripping a paint brush.

Wylie said dementia has become a huge trend in the care-taking industry, which makes this training important across all of Community First Solutions' agencies.

"We have to look at how we have to provide that dementia care across all of (Community First's) business lines," she said. "It's about developing a relationship."

Berkeley Square wellness program coordinator Donna Mattia has helped coordinate the OMA program for 12 Berkeley Square residents each bi-

ennial session, and said her favorite part of the program was to see the residents feel so proud of their artistic accomplishments.

"After they've done their paintings, they're so proud, and they feel like they have a purpose and they're still capable of doing things," she said.

She said when a resident is reluctant to try the program, she tries to ask them to attend once and be an observer.

"I try to introduce them to the students, and sometimes see a relationship build right away, before you know it, there's a brush in their hand and they go to town," she said. The programs at Berkeley Square and Westover culminate in an art show every April for residents and families to view the finished pieces.

Fopma-Loy said that the strength of OMA and all of Scripps' projects is that they are "failure-free."

"The results that we have seen in the group with OMA – one administrator has called it magic in action," she said. "People focus on the losses so much, we're emphasizing the strengths remaining in (individuals with) dementia."