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Still learning and creating, with 'Art of Aging'

Katy Zillmer staff writer, photos by Linda Baumeister



Oak Meadows resident Carl Mathern, a former farmer, describes the farm life and crops during the Minnesota Creative Arts and Aging Network art project June 9. A church was added into the ear of corn to represent his strong faith.



Pearl Hughes paints intricate details on her clay memory tile. Hughes' life story is represented in her art by Wisconsin shape, pet canary, WAAC (Women's Army Air Corp), and the Eiffel Tower for traveling.

Oak Meadows residents became artists for a week during the recent Art of Aging program hosted by the Minnesota Creative Arts and Aging Network June 6-10.

Anne Krocak, an artist working with MnCAAN, visited **Oak Meadows** last week to teach residents how to make clay memory tiles and a booklet to document the experience. Local libraries collaborate on the art workshops with MnCAAN, said Kim Utecht Prayrock, director of community relations at **Oak Meadows**. She first heard of the idea through the Oakdale Library.

The program offers residents at senior housing sites throughout the metro area socialization and creative expression. As they get together with experienced artists to learn and create, their cognitive and overall health benefits as well, according to Utecht Prayrock.

Art of Aging started in North Dakota and the lead artist there, Lila Hauge-Stoffel, is working with the Minnesota program in its first year. It is funded by the National Endowment for the Arts.

Buzz about art

Oak Meadows residents started their activity last week discussing the memories they might want to portray on a clay tile, such as where they grew up, favorite hobbies, or their careers. The numerous participants began to arrive early by the second day because they were so excited to continue working, Utecht Prayrock said. "It's certainly created a buzz at **Oak Meadows**," she said.

Community volunteers helped residents with their projects as Krocak taught the group and visited with individual artists as they worked. "It's a joy for me to get to know everybody," she said. Carl Mathern, who recently moved to **Oak Meadows**, sat nearby diligently working on his tile with

volunteer Marlys Kinsella. His idea was to create a tile in the shape of an ear of corn, to reflect his life in Iowa working as a farmer, Mathern said. That personal touch made the difference between just attending an "activity" and becoming enthusiastic about creating art. "I didn't think I was going to enjoy it, but I did," he said. Carl, 94, added his name and birth date on the tile to personalize the project. What will he do with his creation? It will likely be a gift for one of his two daughters, he said with a laugh.

Friends and fun

At another table, friends Pearl Hughes, Shirley Grabowski and Joyce Conway enjoyed the camaraderie of working on the art project together. "We've had fun with it," Grabowski said. She created a tile dedicated to her family, with an image of their house on the East Side of St. Paul, her husband Ed and their four children. Ed, who passed away, is portrayed standing on a ladder because he was always busy making repairs to their home, Grabowski said.

She also included a sun to reflect Ed singing "You are my sunshine," to her, plus their boat and dog to recall the family's frequent trips to the lake. Hughes and Conway also incorporated their families into their art.

Hughes, who was in the Women's Army Air Corps, used images such as the Eiffel Tower to represent her travels during the service. She used her favorite activities such as playing cards to add to the tile and those her children enjoyed at a young age, reading and climbing trees. Finally, she included her pet canary. Hughes said she's done similar projects in the past, including making nativity sets as gifts. The memory tile, however, is destined to be an early present to herself for her upcoming 94th birthday. "I'm going to keep it," she said. Conway also has a "crafty" background, she said, as a student in ceramics, which she enjoyed for 20 years.

The idea for her tile came from her love of cooking and gardening, Conway said. The tile is shaped as a spoon with flowers along the edges. Recognizing her family, she designed images of wedding rings and a heart to reflect love for her husband, kids, and grandchildren, Conway said. She added that she's enjoyed all the activities offered by **Oak Meadows**, but especially the arts workshop. "I think it's very nice of them to make programs like this available," she said.

Forever memories

LaVaughn Powellek agreed. "I thought this would be a challenge and that I would try it," she said while deciding about the finishing touches to her roller skate-shaped tile. "My passion was roller skating," Powellek said. In high school Powellek and a girlfriend developed a roller skating routine for a school program, she recalled. They had never done anything like it before, but she was hooked on roller skating from then on. "We went to the roller rink every week," she said. Powellek and her husband also owned a cabin, so she used woods as a border on her memory tile. She worked with volunteer Ruth Olson. "Once she hit on the roller skating idea I saw her eyes light up," Olson said.

Participants at the program celebrated their work with a display of the completed tiles last Friday afternoon.

Utecht Prayfrock also helped them finish booklets on the activity, with pictures of their progress and interacting with volunteers and Krocak. Utecht Prayfrock added that being prompted by the tile project made several of the residents recall stories about their lives she's never heard before.

"It's just amazing to me about what happens when you talk," she said. "It's just been so awesome."

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Photos by Linda Baumeister at Lillie News*