

## Capturing memories in clay

• Article by: [KEVIN GILES](#) , Star Tribune Updated: June 11, 2011

Residents of Oakdale senior center depict war, romance, hobbies and their life's work in a special arts camp to celebrate the experience of aging.



**M**arcella Mazur molded a lake cottage out of clay that included a set of stern eyes that her children will remember from the glares she gave them in church when they didn't behave. Her husband, Mick, a collector of miniature clown faces all of his life, made a larger clay version.

Over at the next table, Carl Mathern, 94, sculpted a corn cob on a stalk with a tractor sitting on top. He talked about how he and his five brothers survived the Depression in northwest Iowa when market prices crumbled to dust.

"No money, but we saved our farm by working together," he said.

These folks were among dozens of residents at Oak Meadows Senior Living in Oakdale who participated in a three-day arts camp last week to preserve their richest memories in clay. Their creations, in shapes and letters, represented fond relationships, extraordinary achievements, even hobbies that kept them happy and preoccupied in their younger years.

"They have something visual right in front of them," said artist Anne Krocak. "There's a tremendous amount of pride. There's so much joy that's shared, and community in sharing together."

Shirley Grabowski made a house -- she has six children -- with an airplane flying over it. During World War II she drove rivets for 10 hours straight at the North American Aviation defense plant in Kansas City. She and a partner assembled "vertical tail stabilizers" for B-25 bombers, known as "Billy Mitchells," that flew missions over Japan and Germany. They drove 940 rivets on each tail piece, nine sections a day, often six days a week.

"It was hard work. We had calluses you couldn't believe," Grabowski said. Then she smiled as she tried to represent that memory with small pieces of clay: "It was easier riveting than it is to do this."

Across the table, Pearl Hughes was busy capturing her war memories, too. She belonged to the Women's Army Air Corps (WAAC) where she learned to teletype. Toward the end of the war the Army sent her to Paris. She married an Army medic, and under the rules of the day, had to leave the Army because of that.

A third World War II memory was in the works nearby, where Frank Borash talked about 33 years in the Marine Corps where he rose to the rank of sergeant major. He won a presidential commendation for rescuing a fellow American in Bangladesh during the war.

Borash also played music and performed with his concertina, an accordion-like instrument.

The Oakdale event is part of a larger effort in the seven-county metro area to bring art to senior housing. By the end of this month, 23 such artist residencies will be held at senior housing sites to help seniors reflect on the experience of aging. Curriculums differ, with various art camps offering poetry, memoir writing, dancing, acting, collage, storytelling and musical creativity.

Two agencies have coordinated the arts camps -- the Minnesota Creative Arts and Aging Network, and MELSA, the metrowide library coordinating agency.

Participants in the Oak Meadows camp will get to keep their creations, which Krocak will fire in her kiln. The tiles possibly will be displayed in area libraries for a short while, said Kim Prayfrock, director of community relations at Oak Meadows.

For many of the seniors, the project reminded them all too well of dear ones long gone.

Joyce Conway recalled playing dominoes on Friday nights and volunteering at Guardian Angels church, but she also wanted to find a way to honor her wedding in her clay creation.

Her husband, Dick, a firefighter, was a young man when he died of a heart attack. "A very long time ago," she said.

Kevin Giles • 651-735-3342 Twitter: @sribgiles