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# Mesa Arts Center engages seniors' creative sides

March 31, 2013, 3:01 am

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By DANIEL QUIGLEY

MESA, Ariz. (AP) — As it gains more and more attention on the regional, national and international stages, Mesa Arts Center is fast becoming mecca for artists from all over.

But among the most important functions of the young Mesa landmark is the role it plays in engaging the community nearby and building a local interest in art-centric education.

One program is specifically targeting a demographic often left out of the scene: the city's senior citizens.

Exclusively for them, MAC designed Creative Aging, a program that encourages Mesa's active adult community to find their artistic sides through movement and visual arts.

MAC arts outreach coordinator Mandy Buscas said that older residents often didn't engage in the arts in their younger days because of practical lifestyles that included having to raise families and careers. Art and expression didn't seem to fit the mold.

"When they were younger, they weren't really encouraged to engage in the arts and so now they're coming back to it later in life," Buscas said.

The program has two components, Creative Movement, which teaches expression through choreography, and a visual arts component.

The program is offered at three main venues: to residents at Fellowship Square, an independent living community primarily home to those 80 and older; Serrine Adult Day Health Services clients, many of who have dementia, Alzheimer's disease or other neurological afflictions; and at New Frontiers For Lifelong Learning, a program through Mesa Community College that includes more than 400 participants and is dedicated to lifelong learning.

Buscas said Creative Movement participants not only gain camaraderie and confidence, but also physical health benefits.

"The anecdotal information that we get is that individuals are coming in and after they leave, they're exuberant. They have a lot of energy," Buscas said. "They have found ways they can move and push their bodies that they never knew they could at that age, so they're finding additional health benefits by working through movement."

The positive results are also showing in the visual program, she said.



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"Some of the participants come in and their very nervous about engaging in visual art making they don't think they're an artist and at the end they've built a whole new comfort level," Buscas said.

Creative Movement instructor Elizabeth Johnson said older residents often become isolated from the rest of the community because of their age but also because of their health and the events taking place in their lives and a sense powerlessness about having to be cared for.

"When your body hurts and you've lost your husband and your friends are dying, life can be really isolating," Johnson said, speaking generally about the life situations of some of her Creative Movement students.

She said she often sees participants light up after just one class, moving and conversing and a noticeable return of color to the skin.

Johnson said the classes create a comfortable and collaborative atmosphere, which is key to bringing in as many participants as possible to the creative process.

"When you're creating it's not that there's any right or wrong," Johnson said.

"It builds friendships and confidence ... to be able to see and make choices is hugely empowering."

Visual arts instructor Tessa Windt said creative confidence building is a key component to the visual arts program as well.

"I try to create projects that can't go wrong no matter what you do," Windt said. "So for a lot of people it's the first time in their lives when they feel creatively confident and this might come at a time when they don't have the freedom to make a lot of choices in other aspects of their lives."

It's that approach that New Frontiers participant Mary Thomas responds to when she attends Windt's sessions.

Thomas, 71, said she hadn't had an art class since she was in sixth grade.

"If I was ever taught the primary colors I don't remember it," said Thomas, who started taking Windt's classes through New Frontiers.

Under Windt's encouragement, and that of her classmates, Thomas has flourished.

"Some of the art is better than mine, but then mine is just as good as a lot of the others'," Thomas said.

Furthermore, participants are building lasting relationships.

"Those people who take these classes are amazing," Thomas said of her classmates.

She and a group of other students began having lunch weekly after classes during the last session — the program has only been around for about a year.

Ruth Huttner, another New Frontiers student who takes Windt's classes, also said she has made connections beyond those with her artistic side.

"I made wonderful friends in the class," Huttner said. "I thought it was just going to be that you sat there with your artwork and you were sort of in your self-contained bubble, but in fact we talked to people."

Susan Amatouri, a participant in one of Johnson's Creative Movement classes, gets a sense of joy from watching the changes that come forth in her classmates.

"I love seeing the light in their faces because it's a very playful atmosphere — open and playful — and we just come alive.

All three participants credited instructors Windt and Johnson with the success of the classes.

MAC plans to offer even more opportunities that are available to the community, Buscas said.

An exhibition of work from some of Windt's students kicked off at Mesa Contemporary Arts at

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MAC on March 21. The exhibition, called "Words of Wisdom," will run through Monday and will feature artistic banners inspired by students' favorite sayings, quotes and affirmations.

Information from: East Valley Tribune,

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