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## Releasing the inner artist At Boston Home, paint heals souls

By Mindy Pollack-Fusi

Globe Correspondent

When the doors open at the Boston Home next Sunday for the fifth annual "At Home with the Arts" exhibition and sale, what visitors won't see is even more extraordinary than what they will. More stories like this

More than 50 artists from the Boston area produced the 120 paintings, photographs, and collages in the juried show, and 21 of those artists are Boston Home residents with advanced multiple sclerosis and other progressive neurological disorders.

During classes at the Boston Home, most produced their watercolors using extra-large brushes in unsteady hands, and some held brushes in their mouths - the only method they could use to get paint to paper. Many painted on stabilized easels, and a few wore arm slings to help guide their hands toward their art. All sat in wheelchairs.

As important as the end product, the process of painting is an outlet to help residents feel productive and express themselves, many of the Boston Home artists said.

"When I hear a resident tell me that this has given them their soul back, I just want to cry," said teacher Susan Krause, an artist and board member of the Dorchester Arts Collaborative. "During these classes you can practically feel their pride and joy in the process of creating. And the social aspect is also important; it's another way of building community."

Krause teaches watercolor classes in the Boston Home's first-floor lounge three mornings a week for 12 weeks, three times a year. Partially funded by a one-year grant from the Christopher and Dana Reeve Foundation, the \$8,000- to \$10,000-per-year program is seeking additional funding for dedicated art space and year-round classes at the Boston Home, a not-for-profit, specialized care facility for adults with advanced multiple sclerosis and other progressive neurological diseases.

Florence Rawls, the Boston Home's director of community development, established "At Home with the Arts" with inspiration from board member Elizabeth Colburn Moraites, a local artist with MS. Two years ago, Rawls met Krause, an exhibitor at the show, and asked if she would teach a watercolor class. She accepted, and they began with a pilot program for three residents once a week. Participation caught on dramatically, and today, Krause teaches the 21 residents eight at a time in three weekly 90-minute classes. While some were artists before, many were not.

"A good part of what I do is oversee where they each are in their own process, and if I think they are ready to learn a new technique, I show them how to do something differently," Krause said. "I encourage their growth in any way possible - artistic growth, which leads to their being engaged in life in ways they wouldn't have before."

Among the residents exhibiting next Sunday is Linda Stranieri, 56, who paints by holding a brush in her mouth. She once made her living as a civil engineer but today she has limited dexterity in her hands. She has lived at the Boston Home for 12 years.



PHOTO PROVIDED BY THE BOSTON HOME

Resident Susan Hatch painting at The Boston Home

"I never thought I could do this," she said slowly, because speech is difficult for her. During a recent class she attempted to paint a flower petal, but the movement was too intricate.

"Frustrated," she said, and Kerry Donohue, the home's director of activities, who helps out in class, patiently guided her, suggesting she take a break and work on a different area of the painting.

At another table, resident Jane Hildenberger, 49, a former early-childhood educator, painted a sailboat. She graduated from the Arts Institute in Pittsburgh many years ago and said, "I'd be very unhappy if we didn't have art here."

Eleanor Kasilowicz, 49, who has lived at the Boston Home for 14 years, discovered art there. "I may be disabled and in a wheelchair, but I'm not dead, I still have a life I can lead," said the former intensive care nurse. "The administration here encourages us to maintain our independence for as long as we're able."

Last spring a few residents entered their work in the "At Home with the Arts" event. And last fall, for the first time, the Boston Home was among the sites participating in the Dorchester-wide open studios for the Dorchester Arts Collaborative.

Next Sunday, Krause will be displaying her art alongside that of her students.

"It's so powerful what they're doing," she said. "It's like they have a before and after, and now, with painting, they can have something that gives them another reason to get up in the morning."

At Home with the Arts runs from 1-5 p.m. next Sunday at the Boston Home, 2049 Dorchester Ave.