

Didsbury High students are building relationships across generations through art

For Immediate Release, November 28, 2017: Students in Didsbury High School's leadership program are assisting seniors in creating both beautiful art and helpful connections through an innovative program.

'Opening Minds Through Art' is underway for the first time in central Alberta. Each week for eight weeks, 10 Didsbury High students have visited their partners in the Didsbury Integrated Home Care Centre to create abstract art pieces. The theory is that art is the channel to communication and understanding when clear thought and verbal ability is gone. Judging by the bright smiles and easy conversation in the room, the theory is holding true in Didsbury.

"As soon as I heard about the program, I knew it would fill our seniors with a sense of self-esteem and help break down barriers that can keep them isolated and alone," said Brandee Elliott, Recreation Therapist with Didsbury Integrated Home Care. "This program was first developed at the University of Miami and I had the opportunity to take the week-long formal training with 30 other recreation professionals in the province last spring. It has truly been practice-changing for me. It has built connections with the community for our clients, many who live with dementia and all the isolation and depression that brings with it. To see the change this is bringing to each one of them has been incredible!"

The Didsbury Ladies Auxiliary and the Alzheimer Society of Calgary sponsored the first session, and everyone involved is looking forward to Opening Minds Through Art becoming a regular part of life in Didsbury. Organizers are seeing clear signs of success – for everyone involved.

"It's definitely the relationship that is the reward in this program" said Cali Beazley, Didsbury High teacher and leadership mentor. "It creates an environment of acceptance and community, and bridges the generations. We have watched both the seniors and our students become more confident interacting with people who are very different from themselves. Our students have learned so many things about aging and communication and dedication, and I know it has been meaningful to them as they think about future careers. We've had such positive feedback from them, but it hasn't been an easy task for them. They had to formally apply and provide references and criminal record checks, train through both online and in-person classes, and participate in an intensive orientation. But they have made such a commitment to the program and it's been rewarding to be part of this."

"I like the art good enough, but I'm just so happy to be with all the people," said Violet, a resident in Didsbury Integrated Home Care. "I like all our helpers and it has been fun. I think these kids are fantastic to take the time to do this. But, then again, I think they are enjoying it just as much as us!"

Violet and her friends are excited to see their art on display, as part of a silent auction that will help fund the second session of the program next spring. The art show and silent auction takes place this Thursday, November 30 from 3:30 – 6:00 p.m. at the Didsbury Hospital Unit 3 Auditorium (1210–20 Ave).

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