

OPENING MINDS THROUGH ART

A story of experiential learning and breaking down barriers at Trinity Village Care Centre

What is Opening Minds through Art?

Trinity Village Care Centre in Kitchener, Ontario has connected with local secondary schools to give students and older adults living with dementia the opportunity to connect by making art together. The Opening Minds through Art (OMA) program is an intergenerational art program for people living with dementia, grounded in principles of person-centered care. This program promoting one-to-one interaction was founded by Dr. Elizabeth “Like” Lokon in 2007, and is based at Scripps Gerontology Center at Miami University. The mission of OMA is to bridge across age and cognitive barriers through art.



Figure 1 - "Flower Garden" by Mary

The goals of the program are:

1. To promote the social engagement, autonomy and dignity of people living with dementia by providing creative, self-expression opportunities.
2. To provide staff and volunteers with opportunities to build intimate relationships with people living with dementia.
3. To show the public the creative self-expression capacities of people living with dementia through exhibitions of their artwork.
4. To contribute to the scholarly literature on dementia care and the arts.

In 2015, Kathryn Bender, a Recreationist at Trinity Village Care Centre, had the opportunity to be trained as an OMA facilitator. The program has now been offered by Trinity Village Care Centre for four years (8 semesters), in partnership with Eastwood Collegiate Institute and Forest Heights Collegiate Institute. Nithview Community and Waterloo Oxford District Secondary School were also part of this program in 2017. In Kathryn's words, "OMA is not just about doing art, but more about the relationship that develops between the student and their 'artist'."

How does the Opening Minds through Art program work?

A facilitator trained in the OMA program is needed to implement this initiative. Students learn about this fantastic opportunity through information days, word-of-mouth and recommendations by their teachers, and are given an introduction letter to share with their parents. Twenty students are chosen to participate in the program, and are each paired with one 'artist' who is an older adult living with dementia at Trinity Village Care Centre. Before the program begins, students take part in a two-day training course to learn about the basics of dementia, the foundation of OMA philosophy and methodology and skills for effective communication and facilitation of the creative process for people living with dementia. This group then comes together once a week for a period of eight weeks (one school semester) to spend 1.5 hours creating art and spending quality time together, with the assistance of Kathryn and a team of two other trained facilitators: Judy McKnight and Andrea Morneau. Students gain a new understanding of dementia, and both artists and students benefit from mutual relationships and social engagement. At the end of the eight weeks, everyone's accomplishments are celebrated

through an art show open to family and community members. This is a great way for everyone who has been involved to get a chance to meet one another. Students write a personal letter to both their artist and their artist's loved ones, which is presented to the artists at the show along with a certificate of achievement and the works of art they created over the past eight weeks. Students also receive a certificate of participation, letter of reference and community hours to contribute to their secondary school diploma requirements.

How were challenges overcome?

OMA facilitators experienced challenges related to student's knowledge about long-term care and dementia, as well as helping students understand the many different ways that their artists communicated with them, especially when students experienced what Trinity Village Care Centre calls, 'Changeable Situations'. Changeable Situations (or 'Personal Expressions') may occur when an artist has trouble understanding the world around them or expressing their needs, and therefore may become distressed or express words or actions that are difficult to understand. These challenges were overcome by providing information sheets, called "go-to sheets", with information and strategies that students could reference if they were experiencing difficulties communicating with their artist. Additionally, these topics are thoroughly covered in the student's two-day training, and trained facilitators are always available at each session to support both students and artists.



Figure 2 - Students and artists during an OMA session

What makes Opening Minds through Art successful at Trinity Village Care Centre?

Kathryn Bender says that the OMA program is successful because of the committed partnerships that have been developed with the local high schools they work with. She says that "the teachers know which students would be a great fit for the program, and as facilitators we know the artists well, and together we create beautiful relationships." When asked what the key to building successful partnerships is, Kathryn gives the advice that compromise is essential, and that there must be give and take, and a bit of hard but important work. One-way Trinity Village Care Centre builds relationships is by inviting teachers from their partnering high schools to attend art sessions during the semester as well as the art show. Kathryn identifies that this gives teachers the opportunity to see the value of the program and the impact it has on their students.

Kathryn emphasizes the importance of evaluation and reflection in the OMA program, saying "without evaluation, how would we know what to improve?". Students who participate in OMA at Trinity Village Care Centre fill out questionnaires at the beginning and end of the program, which are used to identify what was learned and gained over the eight weeks, and what could be changed or developed further. Finally, the opportunity to create art is a unique and beneficial element of this program because art facilitates the relationship between the student and artist. Another important element of OMA is that each student is matched with the same artist for the duration of the program, because this allows the pair to get to know each other well and build an authentic and mutual relationship. Kathryn has seen these connections form and grow for many participants, and has witnessed relationships continue even after the program has ended, with students returning to volunteer and visit their artist.