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ART CLASSES A FORM OF THERAPY

Free sessions help seniors reconnect with outside world

By Rosa Valdez-Robinson
FOR THE EXPRESS-NEWS

When he lost his wife, Sarah, to cancer after 65 years of marriage, retired teacher Ed Dassing received a ray of hope courtesy of Sarah's caregiver.

Knowing he would need an outlet to work through his grief, the caregiver told him about the variety of free activities offered at the city's senior centers. So Dassing, 89, who remembered that he liked to doodle and draw in class growing up, signed up for a class that has proven to be healing to his spirit and therapy for the soul.

"This (class) is really helping," he said. "It is a relaxing time for me, and it's a good place to start for anybody with an interest in painting."

Hearing the caretaker talk about her love of nature and living in Zambia, in southern Africa, he was inspired to look up African landscapes. He

Painted one like it and is giving his first painting to her as a sign of his appreciation.

At the Alicia Treviño Lopez Senior Center, on the city's Northwest Side — one of nine city senior centers around San Antonio — classes range from beginning to advanced. Among them are games, yoga, folklorico or Zumba dance, painting, transportation or medical services and tax preparation. More than 400 senior citizens congregate there daily.

For some, the center offers release from depression, grief or other ailments that might otherwise isolate them. Socializing puts them back in touch with people. But painting connects them to their spiritual selves.

"The most rewarding thing about teaching them how to paint is seeing them break through the fear they have," said art instructor Jane Madrigal, who has a master's degree

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Seniors and depression

Older adults are at increased risk of depression, mostly due to illness and/or becoming homebound, according to the Center for Disease Control's website. The number rises to about 50 percent if they have more than one illness.

As people age, they begin to feel undervalued when family members begin to grow and move away, or they feel no longer needed upon retirement. Some common signs to look for:

- » Loss of interest in normal activities
- » Feelings of hopelessness, guilt or worthlessness
- » Difficulty concentrating
- » Insomnia, overeating or weight loss
- » Thoughts of suicide.

"The good news," the CDC states, "is that the majority of older adults are *not* depressed. Some national estimates of major depression in older people ... range from less than 1 percent to about 5 percent but rise to 13.5 percent in those who require home health care and to 11.5 percent in older hospital patients."

Rosa Valdez-Robinson



Camellia Watts (left) and Lilia Alvarado occupy a colorful table as senior citizens participate in an art class at the Alicia Treviño Lopez Senior Center on Culebra Road.

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Photos by Tom Reel / San Antonio Express-News

Teresa Aguirre discusses paintings she has finished and displayed in the hall as senior citizens participate in an art class at the Alicia Treviño Lopez Senior Center.

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in business but prefers teaching at the centers. She remembered one student who thought she might have a heart attack due to her fear. Today, Madrigal jokes that the student developed her talent to the point where she could be a candidate for a master's degree in art.

Dassing once considered pursuing an art career at the Pratt Institute in New York City, but chose not to for financial reasons. After serving in the Navy, he later became a chemistry teacher. He took only one watercolor class years ago and liked it, so it was good to paint again.

"I've never worked with acrylics," Dassing said, "and I'm learning new techniques. The class size is good (about 12), and the instructor is very helpful. You can't go wrong with it being free."

Madrigal, a self-taught artist, muralist and self-proclaimed feminist Xicana, says the best part of teaching is allowing each person to select the work they want to begin with. They bring to the class a picture of any subject they want to try. If they love the subject they are painting, they will do better, she said.



Robert Ramirez (from left), Joan Harclerode and Maria Phillips stay busy painting in an art class.



Instructor Jane Madrigal (left) shows Mari Elena Kypuros how to create a purple color.

"They tap into their creative spirit, which we all have since childhood, but it is not valued as we grow older," she said. Once they get over the fear of making a mistake, or their inability to paint, it helps them recognize what was holding them back. Then they take the liberty to paint as they wish. "Children don't worry about mistakes, they just paint," added Madrigal, who also has taught youngsters and finds they have no inhibitions.

Madrigal became interested in art at 18, when she visited her grandmother in Mexico. She realized she knew nothing about her own ancestry or culture. She started painting on chairs and moved on to other projects, painting mostly ethnic women on canvases, to sketching, glass and woodwork. She won national recognition for pioneering the graffiti movement in Austin. She has painted murals in San Antonio, Austin, and New York City and

was project coordinator at San Anto Cultural Arts involving youth in proactive projects. She teaches through the Bihl Haus GO! Arts program and other organizations. Another senior art student, Teresa Aguirre, 69, is on her third course since she began attending the center. "It is very enjoyable and relaxing," she said. "You lose yourself in your project, and time goes by without realizing it."

Although the center provides all supplies, Aguirre has gone on to purchase her own canvas, paint and easel. She paints at home at every opportunity. "It's changed my perspective about everything," she added. "I now see shapes, lines, shades and colors that I never saw before."

For more information or to find a senior center, call 210-207-7172 or visit sanantonio.gov/humanservices