

## **Art class at retirement home proves unforgettable**

**by Shane Arman - Monday, December 22, 2008**

<http://www.uwosh.edu/today/1577/art-class-at-retirement-home-unforgettable/>

Kate Brockman always will remember the classes she taught as part of her service learning project, even if most of her students won't.

During summer and fall 2008, Brockman, a psychology major and art minor at the University of Wisconsin Oshkosh, helped the residents of the Evergreen Retirement Community in Oshkosh to create works of art. Many of her students had lost mental functions due to dementia or Alzheimer's disease.

"I always wanted to help people," said Brockman, who grew up with her grandmother and great-grandmother in New Glarus, Wis. "It's common practice to live with and take care of the elderly."

However, she still was nervous about teaching art at Evergreen.

"It was up to me what we did and how it was run," she said.

Brockman engaged her elderly students with watercolor paints, oil pastels and 3-D objects like leaves and sticks. UW Oshkosh professor Susan McFadden, who oversaw the project, required Brockman to describe each days events in her journal.

"The idea is that the elderly still have the capability of expressing creativity," McFadden said. "By being able to make a painting, they are communicating something that they are not able to communicate in any other way."

McFadden said that dealing with dementia patients can be very difficult because some have lost sight while others have lost language skills, and so making a connection becomes much more challenging.

"It's a marvelous way of giving them a sense of selfhood that they can connect with other people through their art," McFadden said.

Brockman's teaching methods had to change whenever she saw the need for a specific structure, such as a step-by-step process allowing the elderly to become comfortable with their work and with their young instructor.

"I had to reorganize my thoughts and come at it with a different approach," Brockman said.

After an adjustment period, Brockman saw her students grow as artists, even as her relationship with them transformed.

"One of the ladies mentioned that she got to know people because of the group," Brockman said. "The class became more of a social interaction among all the ladies."

Her experience taught her that art puts everyone on common ground, providing a healthy way to express emotion.

“I think of art as my release,” she said. “As long as you can put some sort of emotion into it, it’ll help you.”

Brockman plans to apply to Mount Mary College’s master’s program and to pursue a career in art therapy. Her supervisor at Evergreen compiled a book filled with photos of the patients she worked with, the art they created and messages from her former students, but Brockman won’t need the thoughtful memento to recall her amazing experiences at the retirement home.

“Just seeing the glow in their faces — that was the most rewarding, to see how happy they all were to be a part of it,” she said.