



EXPRESS YOURSELF

BY SUSAN PASTERNAK

For 93-year-old Mary Evelyn Sundlof, “movie director” wasn’t a title she would have ever assumed for herself. But that’s just how her art therapist, Caroline Edasis, refers to her as the two of them put together animated videos based on figurines that Sundlof has knit over the years.

SUNDLOF, A RESIDENT AT MATHER PAVILION, a skilled nursing and memory care community in Evanston, has found a meaningful way to express herself through the art therapy program at Mather. For Sundlof, who has physical impairments as well as short-term memory loss, the program has been instrumental in keeping her socially engaged with other residents and her therapist, according to her son **John Sundlof**.

“She gets a lot of recognition from people who see a different side to her that they wouldn’t necessarily know,” Sundlof says. “It’s obvious to them that while she may have some limitations, you can have a very witty and engaging conversation with her.”

Therapists at **Mather Lifeways**, an Evanston-based nonprofit organization that develops and implements programs and residences with the focus on aging well, are passionate about the power of the arts in improving the well-being of older adults. They spoke about their crafts at a daylong series of seminars in May, attended by professionals interested in learning about the latest research and trends.

Whether it is providing a paint palette and canvas, a forum for improvisational acting, or music therapy, new research is demonstrating how pivotal the arts can be in therapeutic settings for older adults. Many residents and participants in these types of creative programs have physical impairments or various stages of memory loss, and engaging them in creative activities is therapeutic in emotional, social and physical ways.

“I believe the creative arts are a really fundamental component of providing person-centered care, because making art is such a present-moment experience,” Edasis says. “Being able to provide someone with the tools to express themselves and being able to validate that expression is so important.”

For **Jenni Rook**, Executive Director of the **Music Institute of Chicago’s** Institute for Therapy through the Arts, presenting a particular song or style of music to patients with dementia can help them to retrieve memories. Music also activates the motor cortex in the brain, stimulating muscles to move without us even consciously telling our bodies to do so, she says. Nodding a head, tapping a foot or swaying side to side are all responses to music seen in patients with sometimes limited use of their muscles.

“This is not magic, it’s science,” Rook says. “Music therapists have tools and those are the elements of music. We can manipulate these musical elements (dynamic, pitch, style, tempo, etc.) to achieve a neurological response. Music is a whole-brain function.”

No matter the science behind the work, John Sundlof credits Edasis and the creative arts therapy programs at Mather with his mother’s continued engagement with her peers, and her pride in participating in the various programs.

The participants in the arts programs “have a common mission of engaging with each other, and that’s been really good for her,” Sundlof says. ■