

THE HOME ISSUE

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## Redefining home

Art, music, and fine cuisine enhance the lives of local seniors

by Stacey Rowe



Resident Cathy Covey and art therapist Robert Whiteside



Jewish Home resident Cathy Covey painting with watercolor



An example of the birdhouse initiative

Long-term care doesn't often connote a sense of home—in fact, many might lament the loss of independence and leaving their houses when making the decision to move into a senior housing community or skilled nursing center. Words like “institutional” or “facility” could even come to mind. When Jewish Senior Life announced an eighty-three million dollar expansion project last June, I recalled the fond memories of the years I spent with them as an art therapy intern during college and graduate school. Nearly twenty years ago they had seemed ahead of the curve with their focus on quality of life and a strong sense of community. Naturally, I wondered what the expansion would entail and if the art therapy program was still alive and well.

Art therapy is a mental health profession—much like music and dance therapy. Visual art media can be used for assessment and evaluation in a variety of settings and with myriad populations. It's also a therapeutic intervention to explore conflict, emotions, and behaviors with the goal of improving a client's well-being. During my time at the Jewish Home, part of Jewish Senior Life, I worked with a handful of Holocaust survivors, several folks dealing with dementia, Alzheimer's disease, mood and personality disorders, and physical and cognitive challenges.

Today, the art studio is slightly larger and is led by Robert Whiteside, a licensed art therapist. Whiteside graduated from the

creative arts therapy program at Nazareth College and was also an intern at the Jewish Home before moving into his position. He additionally holds a master's degree in fine arts from Rochester Institute of Technology and has taught several classes at Nazareth and Genesee Community College. Whiteside typically accepts two to four art therapy interns per semester and likes them to work with residents who don't seem to be adjusting well. He says, “There are lots of things that come out that aren't necessarily in their medical records.”

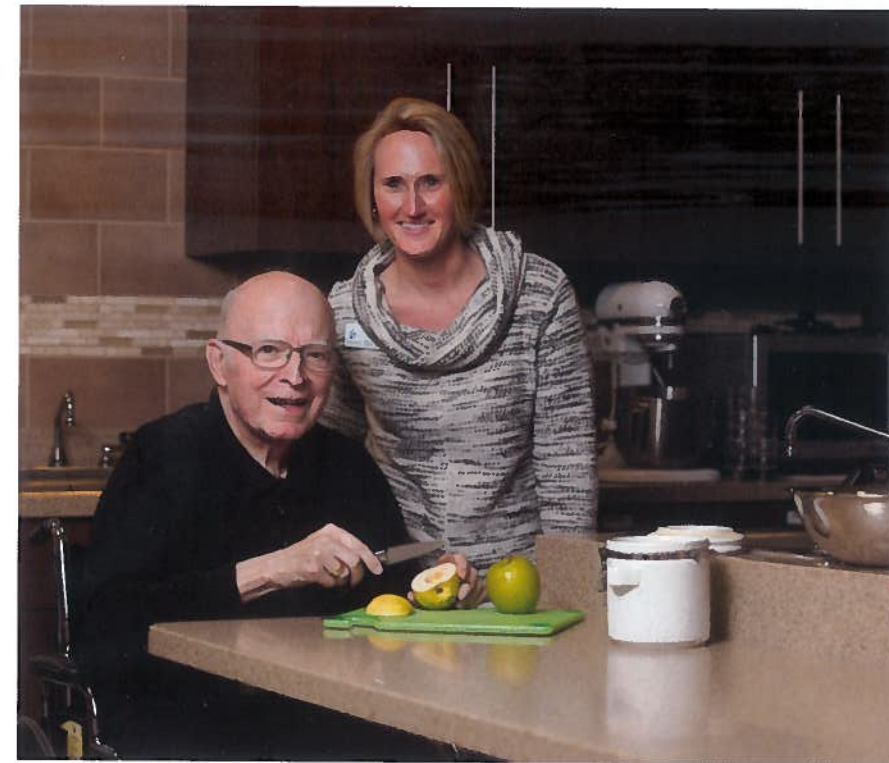
The art studio is open mornings and afternoons, and residents are encouraged to make whatever they would like. Whiteside enjoys the open format and says, “I like integrating people with different cognitive abilities.” He believes in fostering their creativity—such as encouraging them to choose their own colors—and not influencing them too much during the actual process. Residents can enjoy working with a variety of materials such as watercolor, pastel, paint, marquetry, and more. There is an in-house gallery with rotating shows, and residents, staff, and volunteers participate in the annual LeadingAge New York art show. Last year, the Jewish Home submitted a total of twenty-four works.

One particular project, Whiteside's birdhouse initiative, began as a lucky find while supply shopping. He procured 400 redwood birdhouses that were made in the 1950s, which he offers to residents to adorn. “The

birdhouse becomes a metaphor for your own home,” says Whiteside. The artists infuse personality into them with paints and embellishments, and then they are displayed, gifted to others, or hung in a tree outdoors.

Cathy Covey is a resident who has been experimenting with watercolor and pastel. Whiteside has a designated spot for her in the studio, where she's delighted to pursue her passion. “I get something in my mind and I work at it,” she says, “and this is the only spot in the building where I can do that.” Covey is developing quite a portfolio from working in the studio about four days a week. Some days, she will even visit twice. Covey is also involved in the resident council and goes on outings that Whiteside organizes, such as JCC Center Stage plays, Rochester Philharmonic Orchestra performances, and trips to the Memorial Art Gallery.

Covey plans on relocating to one of the three new buildings currently under construction. Each building will have three stories, resulting in a total of nine homes designed under the Green House Project, a national evidence-based model for care that creates a welcoming home-like environment. Twelve residents will live in each home, each of which will have a hearth area where people can gather for programs and meaningful engagements. Every home will have a large community kitchen similar to the culinary kitchen located in the Jewish Home's legacy building.



Resident Bill Smith and person-centered care manager Susan Adams-Price in the culinary kitchen

A big fan of the culinary kitchen, Bill Smith is a resident who enjoys the hands-on cooking opportunities as well as being active on the Jewish Home's food committee. The group meets once a month to discuss quality of service and make suggestions for improvements. “The staff is always challenging our taste buds with new ideas,” he says. A retired lawyer and lifelong Presbyterian, Smith sings the praises of the executive chef and sous chef (Brian Hudson and John DeWaters) and their creative abilities in the kosher kitchen. “These guys are not institutional dweebs,” Smith laughs and continues, “they care passionately about how they lead their professional and personal lives.” He then goes on to describe a recent memorable meal, “They made this kosher version of Eggs Benedict on a fresh biscuit with sausage gravy made from soy and some genius flavors—you would never believe it was kosher. It tasted just like sausage!”

Person-centered care manager Susan Adams-Price describes the three core values woven into the continuum of care offered on the campus: having a meaningful life, a real home (moving away from institutionalism), and empowered staff. While programs like art and music therapy, outings, delicious food, and other recreational offerings certainly add to the experience, every tiny detail is being considered as they move forward with the Green House homes. Tablecloths and fresh flowers will add warmth to

long tables with rounded corners for community meals; and one might see a different color scheme or perhaps the number of fish in the aquarium will assist residents with orientation—one fish for the first floor, two for the second floor.

Eighty percent of Jewish Home staff has been trained on the Green House initiative, and they are very excited about the change. “Education and teamwork has really changed the staff—once the communication skills fall into place, it's easier to care for our residents,” Price says. Green House staff will be referred to as *Adir*, a Hebrew word meaning strong and mighty. Along with providing residents with personal care, the *Adir* will dine with them and help out with programming.

Bill Smith has not ruled out moving over to the Green House homes. For now, he prefers staying at the legacy building and aging in place, since that building will also be renovated to incorporate small households on each floor for all long-term care residents. The transitional care program (short-term rehabilitation) is also expanding into all private rooms. After raving about a mouth-watering breakfast crême brûlée he recently enjoyed, Smith praises the quality of person-centered care available to all residents: “This is the finest home I have ever been in.” <sup>(SAS)</sup>

Stacey Rowe is a freelance writer based in Rochester.

Photos by Michael Hanlon