

# Using art to maintain dignity

## OMA 'opens minds' at Jewish Home

LOIS GOLDRICH

In 2007, Dr. Elizabeth Lokon created an art program at Miami University in Oxford, Ohio, based on the premise that people with dementia are capable of expressing themselves creatively, and that such expression improves their physical and psychological well-being.

"I met Lika when she was a Ph.D. student at Miami University," said Jewish Home Family President/CEO Carol Silver Elliott, who was working at Cedar Village in Ohio at the time. (Lika is Dr. Lokon's nickname.) "She came to try out a project for her doctorate. She's quite a package," Ms. Silver Elliott added, noting that Dr. Lokon has earned degrees in art and adult education, as well as her doctorate in gerontology.

Dr. Lokon believes that regardless of their level of dementia, people "still have the ability to make choices," Ms. Silver Elliott said. They should be afforded that



JEWISH HOME FAMILY

opportunity and we must never forget that they are adults. Anything we do to help stimulate them should be done on an adult level."

"We do it well here, but in many other

nursing homes, art activity is coloring with crayons," Ms. Silver Elliott continued. "It's infantile. It's also frustrating to the patients, because they feel they're failing if they're not coloring inside the lines."

OMA – Opening Minds through Art – "uses real art to create projects for people with dementia. They make choices and create art. It's not as much about the art as about having control. When you have dementia, everything is being taken away from you. You don't choose where you live, what you eat." But through OMA, "you can continue to have control over something."

A statement on Miami University's website notes that OMA is "grounded in person-centered ethics" and aims to "build bridges across age and cognitive barriers through art." The program is implemented in group sessions. Up to 12 people with dementia work one-on-one with trained volunteers.

Sessions have a very structured format, "with projects being defined and with volunteers given specific recommendations for roles and conversations with participant artists," Ms. Silver Elliott said. "Two different pieces of art are displayed, as

SEE ART PAGE 31



## Art

FROM PAGE 11

well as a project that goes with them. The folks can choose which they want to work with."

The volunteers sit with the participant artists, ready to do such tasks as put papers in their hands or get them more colors. "They don't distract," Ms. Silver Elliott said, pointing out that volunteers are there to be supportive. They do, however, form "incredible relationships" with the participants.

"I persuaded my husband to volunteer for the pilot program this summer," she said. "He said all right, even though it was outside of his comfort zone." During the four-week program, "he bonded with the resident, and he was sad when the program was over."

Volunteers are taught to use "art talk" — "not just to say 'what a pretty picture,' but 'I love the contrast in this,' she continued, "It maintains adult dignity. To have control, express themselves in a way that has meaning, people have a sense of real accomplishment. It's like watching magic in action."

Ms. Silver Elliott said that what's "really cool is that Lika, who is still at Miami, built in all sorts of measurements." She feels fortunate to have been part of that research when she was at Cedar Village.

"At first, they just videotaped during the program and had a social anthropologist analyze facial expressions. Then they began recording observations during and after the program to see if it made a difference and for how long."

In this context, Ms. Silver Elliott discussed the writer Norman Cousins, who was determined to use laughter and positive thinking to ward off pain during a serious illness. Mr. Cousins wrote, "I made the joyous discovery that ten minutes of genuine belly laughter had an anesthetic

effect and would give me at least two hours of pain-free sleep."

Researchers wanted to know if the art program similarly would improve participants' lives after the sessions, in areas such as appetite and cognition.

"It does make a difference," Ms. Silver Elliott said, noting that participants seemed to enjoy themselves more on the days the sessions were held. "It brightens their days, gives them stimulated engagement," she said. "They pick up a brush or glue and create something from who they still are."

The Jewish Home family involved some 35 participant artists

in its pilot project, with one volunteer per participant plus additional volunteers serving as leaders. "We sent the activity directors from the Jewish Home, Jewish Home Assisted Living, and the Gallen Adult Day Health Care Center to Miami University to get training from Lika directly," Ms. Silver Elliott said.

OMA — now a part of the Jewish Home Family program — will start up again after the holidays. Staff members will choose participants to ensure that those who take part in the program will benefit from it. Ms. Silver Elliott said she hopes to run the program more than once a week.



PHOTOS BY JEWISH HOME FAMILY