

2015

# Creative Expression and Dementia

Danielle A. Lavee-Dixon  
*Dominican University of California*

**Survey: Let us know how this paper benefits you.**

---

## Recommended Citation

Lavee-Dixon, Danielle A., "Creative Expression and Dementia" (2015). *Senior Theses and Capstone Projects*. 31.  
<https://scholar.dominican.edu/senior-theses/31>

This Senior Thesis is brought to you for free and open access by the Student Scholarship at Dominican Scholar. It has been accepted for inclusion in Senior Theses and Capstone Projects by an authorized administrator of Dominican Scholar. For more information, please contact [michael.pujals@dominican.edu](mailto:michael.pujals@dominican.edu).

## **Creative Expression and Dementia**

By Danielle Lavee-Dixon

This thesis, written under the direction of the candidate's thesis advisor and approved by the Chair of the Humanities and Culture Studies program, has been presented to and accepted by the Faculty of the Humanities and Cultural Studies in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree for Bachelor of Arts. The content and research methodologies presented in this work represent the work of the candidate alone.

Danielle Aleeza Lavee-Dixon, Candidate

Date 5/7/2015

Dr. Chase Clow, Chair

Date 5/7/2015

Lynn Sondag, Primary Thesis Advisor

Date 5/7/2015

Copyright © 2015 Danielle Lavee-Dixon

All Rights Reserved.

### **Abstract**

Art is the expression or application of human creative skills using that individual's imagination. While most often taught amongst young people, I believe that art is a tool that can be used at all ages to promote reflection, pleasure, and personal passions. As a way to investigate the benefits of artistic expression amongst different groups of people, I have focused on the rewards achieved with art practiced by individuals living with dementia. Highlighting the difficulties a patient with dementia may encounter, and some of the benefits art can have on those patients; I was able to create art workshops that are easily accessible, and enjoyable. The workshops I have developed allow elderly care facilities a way to introduce creative expression to their patients. These classes presented in my paper are supported with research and personal experiences explored through various avenues including an account of my personal teaching experience. The lesson plans discussed were created with the understanding that not all care facilities have volunteers and teachers with teaching backgrounds, and cover basic teaching techniques. Through research I have found that there is a large need for an instrument such as this. My goal as a teacher is to promote independent practice, generate enthusiasm, and to create excitement in the student's day.

**Table of Contents**

Introduction.....5

Section One: Inspiration.....6

Section Two: Research.....9

Section Three: Workshops/Lesson Plans.....14

Section Four: Experience.....22

Works Cited.....27

## Introduction

With an artistic background, and inspiring family members, I found my passion in teaching art. This inspiration grew more specialized as my grandmother was diagnosed with dementia, this consuming element in her life created boundaries for her and her family members that we often struggled to understand. We learned from doing creative activities with her that during this painful time in her life, she was able to find joy. I sought out workshops and activities in elderly care facilities that would create these moments for all aging people. There are many Art Therapeutic programs established, however from my own experience with my grandmother, I knew that I wanted to focus less on therapy's use of art, and more on creative expression as a whole. The main distinguishing factor between art therapy and elder artistic expression is that art therapy is much more individualized and focused while elder artistic expression focuses on the entire process for any person participating. From personal experiences with my grandmother, I found that readily available, and easily accessible art for people with dementia was difficult to find. I wanted to create a lesson plan book that was easy to use, even to those without a teaching background, in order make art more readily available to all. After creating several workshops I was able to team up with *Senior Access*, a social club for people living with memory loss and dementia; where I had the opportunity to teach my classes and reflect on my experience.

### **Section One: Inspiration**

Growing up in an artistic family, artistic expression always seemed to find its way into my life. It never seemed out of the ordinary to be surrounded by art since it was a common interest amongst every family member. As I shape my own path to my future, I look to my parents and grandparents for inspiration. These four individuals made their livings with creative careers, and encouraged me to use this power of creation to pave my own path.

My grandfather, Yehuda emigrated at the age of 19 from Jewish Palestine to California to study and become an architect. What started as a seemingly impossible battle for an immigrant in 1942, soon resulted in incredible success for him. His success followed though his whole life, he remained working and designing until he was 88 years old. My grandmother, Julie was an artist in the more traditional sense of the word; her whole life spent painting for her own pleasure. She made a living drawing for women's fashion magazines in the early 40's. My father Oren was a musician, finding rare instruments to play. As he grew older he followed my grandfather's footsteps and became an architect. My father's excitement for the construction element as well as the architectural designs often meant living in an exciting construction zone. His architectural designs draw attention to meticulous detail, always making the final product breathtaking. My Mother, Michelle forged an incredible career for herself styling the hair of Hollywood's elite in the 60's, and remained creative and artistic in every other facet of her life. Nothing scared her away as she did party planning, painting, interior design, cooking, jewelry making, photography, the list goes on. I've found, as I look to four models for inspiration and guidance, the common theme for happiness and success is their lifelong relationship to creative expression.

My advocacy for the importance of creative expression with seniors began as I watched my grandparents both age, fall ill, and pass on. The years in which their decline took place truly

put the importance of life into perspective. My grandmother suffered from dementia, and the last few years she was rarely lucid. What started as a slow decline became much more rapid during the last three years of her life. We found that when we would discuss art, poetry, or sit with her to draw, her mood would suddenly change. As a family we began making greater efforts to sit with her and sketch, put on her favorite music, or even look through photos of her old artwork. These moments are what I hold onto tightest; for the grandmother that I remembered growing up would come back to us. Even if just for a minute or so, the smile on her face would make it worth while. The more often we would do these types of projects, the more enthusiasm we would see from her. It made what was a very uncomfortable time for her a little more bearable.

My grandfather's passing took place in unfortunate circumstances, after getting an infection from the hospital during a gallstone removal procedure his decline was rapid. Prior to his decline, my grandfather worked every day, up until 7 months before his passing. Before he fell ill, his dedication to work and his drive to find new things to experience and create kept him alert until the end. My grandfather's creative outlet was to share stories, to look through his old designs and his old artwork. Although it is a less traditional sense of creativity, we used to drive around Los Angeles to stop by all his former projects and buildings while basking in the sunshine. He was so proud of himself, eager to share his accomplishments. Towards the end, his energy levels were dangerously low and he slowly lost all autonomy. However, being able to show me his life accomplishments never ceased to spark a smile and a story.

When I plan my future I call upon my memories and experiences to make decisions and build myself better opportunities. My family, and the creativity they shared with me from a young age have been at the forefront of all my major decisions. These individuals have influenced me as I have traveled the world to study and practice art, ultimately bringing me to



Dominican University where I have the opportunity to bring my dream of teaching art to those with dementia a reality.

## Section Two: Research

How do you measure experiences? How can you gauge benefits of an expressive act? I had strong feelings and inclinations about my own awareness to artistic expression, but how would I prove those things? As a way to build upon my knowledge and experiences, I began to conduct research about art programs already established for senior citizens and the results were inspiring, yet few and far between. I often stumbled, as the majority of my findings in books, websites, and otherwise were primarily based on art therapy. Art therapy is an undoubtedly wonderful tool for many people's personal healing processes, but what about the people that simply seek a new creative activity? This is where I focused my research.

Motivated by my grandmother's dementia, I choose to focus on people living with dementia, and also with Alzheimer's. Previously thinking these two terms could be used interchangeably; I learned that the two diseases are actually different, and rather mysterious. I discovered that while they are often diagnosed together, "According to the National Institute on Aging (NIA), Dementia is a brain disorder that affects communication and performance of daily activities and Alzheimer's disease is a form of dementia that specifically affects parts of the brain that control thought, memory and language" ("What is the Difference"). These individuals are the prime candidates for assisted living facilities and they also show immense benefits from art programs (Burns).

In the article I reviewed, *Creativity and dementia: Does artistic activity affect well-being beyond art class*, not only does dementia inadvertently affect the quality of the life of all related persons, but it is also one of the leading causes of death in the United States (28). The severity and rapid growth makes this disease a heartbreaking reality. As individuals struggle with dementia, they lose their memories, which compromises family members, life accomplishments,

and personal characteristics. The article pinpoints the importance of these factors and establishes art as a tool that is not only time consuming in the lives of these elders but has positive impacts on their mood, and more importantly, their brain. Art making provides an experience of using higher levels of brain activity, which is argued that psychological exercise leads to a better quality of life (29-31). These types of improvements and benefits are displayed through people's behavioral changes, communication skills, mental capacities, and regained memories.

When I started my research of California standards for assisted living facilities, I wanted to know what was required by the state as far as activities, and how many of these facilities actually had any artistic expression, especially those serving low-income communities. The requirement is as follows "The services provided under the Assisted Living Waiver:... Social and recreational activities" ("California Assisted"). This is extremely vague and therefore uninformative. For state standards, I could not find a more detailed explanation of the requirements. In the state of California, all requirements made by the state are, understandably, in reference to health and safety. This is where my research became more difficult. I wanted to generate evidence that would support that artistic expression is beneficial to a patient's overall health. Many foundations and facilities have taken it upon themselves to implement different activities for the elder community, especially those that have higher fees. The base cost at an assisted living facility, for a one-bedroom unit in California is \$3,500 a month for each individual ("California Assisted").

I looked to other individuals that discovered this substantial error in our assisted living facilities in this country to grasp a better understanding of the positive effects of artistic expression with dementia patients. Rebecca C. Perry Magniant, MA, ATR-BC, author of *Art Therapy with Older Adults, A Source Book*, highlights her own experiences with dementia, and

the 15 years in which her mother suffered from the disease. She states her motivation to look further, create a program of her own, and describe her own findings stemmed from the lack of programming in place for patients with dementia (202). In her book she identifies the benefits and changes she witnessed first hand. Magniant indicates that when her mother was first diagnosed, her artwork was dull, dark, and often angry, but as they continued to express themselves through art, she witnessed a drastic change. “Even as she reached ever-lowering levels of organization, and her ability to connect her thoughts decreased, her art making continued to be soothing and delightful for her...during the beginning of the middle stage, her artwork changed and became colorful and cheerful” (213). Magninat’s analysis of art with dementia patients continues as she identifies fourteen major benefits. These are: stimulates spontaneity, engages playfulness, externalizes the internal, creates organization, evokes muscle memory, activates the sense, evokes different emotions and memories, gives individuals a sense of control, allows safe self-expression and freedom, promotes sublimation, alleviates boredom and daytime sleepiness, promotes connecting, honors capabilities and integrity, and encourages focus (215-218). While Magniant’s book is based in art therapy, this particular chapter about her mother, focuses on the whole process, pointing out that one does not need to be a therapist to engage the patients in art. She states “[Art] is not merely an activity to entertain and take up time – it is a means to create an attitude which encourages and honors the integrity of our older adults” (222).

Many patients with dementia suffer from anxiety because the loss of memory often makes familiar places and faces seem foreign. According to the article *How Art Therapy Enhances the Quality of Life for Dementia Patients*, art can foster more calm emotions, as they feel in control over the art they are producing, a feeling they often lose when anxiety takes over.

A point made by many was explained eloquently by Jill Hayes when she points out in her book *The Creative Arts in Dementia Care* is that, “The creative arts can provide a means of expressing, releasing and coming to terms with such difficult feelings...they can also help to forge strong empathic contacts between the staff and the patient or client in all dementia care settings” (101). While my research focus remains on the benefits of the patient, these relationships become an important part as they create connections and bonds with the people around them.

I partnered up with *Senior Access*, a daycare facility for people living with dementia. This facility creates a stimulating environment for people in homes or facilities with no activities planned otherwise. Patients are dropped off at 9:00am every morning and picked up at 3:00pm. They offer different outing activities that keep each person cognitively active and entertained such as story time, art workshops, and exercise. Their art projects play a large role in their development. This location is where I was able to implement my own art workshop, which is discussed in section three and four. As part of my research, I attended an all day *Communication at the Intersection of Art and Dementia* workshop, led by Michelle Burns, the activities director at *Senior Access*. This workshop taught me valuable lessons for every aspect of work with elderly artists. I was able to collect a substantial part of my research from hands-on experience, time spent with Michelle and participants at *Senior Access*.

During the workshop, *Communication at the Intersection of Art and Dementia*, Michelle Burns discussed the importance of decision-making, a right we all take advantage of on a daily basis. Depending on the severity of dementia in a participant, they may have lost all autonomy. They no longer decide when they wake up, what they wear, what they eat; daily routine are decided for them. When art is introduced into their lives, they are given chances to make their

own choices. A decision, even as minor as what color paint to pick, can encourage a person to be proud and motivated. Michelle is a strong proponent for including these small decisions within each workshop she teaches. Each individual choice is an opportunity for them. Additionally the topic of social interaction and physical contact was one discussed in detail. Many of the patients, especially those without family that live in elderly care facilities, are not often touched.

Someone holding your hand, offering a hug, or a simple hand on the shoulder can go exponentially far in a person's development. As I constructed my workshops and later taught my lesson, I kept this idea close.

Dementia is, at this point in time, an incurable and irreversible disease that uncomfortably takes the lives of so many senior citizens in this country. Creative expression is a helpful tool to better, what can be, a very traumatic experience for many patients. Creating art with seniors, is an alternative to drugs, and is clearly one with extensive benefits and positive outcomes. Through my research and personal experiences, the need for art within dementia patients is undeniable.

### **Section Three: Workshops and Lesson Plans**

Finding a calling, that I feel passionate about, has felt like a blessing. After my research I was able to create a lesson plan book for facilities to use in order to keep art alive in the lives of their patients. The workshops I developed allow elderly care homes a way to introduce creative expression in their facilities. These classes have been created with the understanding that not all care facilities have volunteers and teachers with teaching backgrounds. The following activities are designed with consideration to this, and can be taught by anyone. Each sample workshop contains material lists, step-by-step instructions, preparation tips, teaching suggestions, benefits, sensory awareness, and safety guidelines. The classes have been designed to follow a unique path of finding one's inner artist, by leaving plenty of room for personal exploration and decision-making.

The first lesson plan explained in detail, the "Stained Glass" window project is one I had the opportunity to teach at *Senior Access*, an account of my experience and photos are analyzed and shared in the following section.

## “Stained Glass” Windows

### **Materials:**

- Contact paper
- Tissue paper
- Masking tape
- Electrical tape
- Scissors

### **Preparation:** Easy

Contact paper should be cut ahead of time 8” x 10”, contact paper is sold with a grid on the back for measuring. Tissue can either be ripped by students, or cut ahead of time for unity.

### **Difficulty:** Easy

**Safety:** While all supplies are non-toxic, participants may try to eat tissue.

### **Benefits and Sensory awareness:**

- Fine motor-skills: used for tearing and separating tissue paper
- Planning ahead: with the sticky contact paper they will want to think about placement ahead of time.
- Textile awareness: the sticky contact paper versus the tissue paper
- Decision-making: with many colored tissue paper
- Activates: different senses with sticky paper, and delicate tissue

### **Steps:**

1. After cutting the contact paper, use the masking tape to adhere contact paper face up with the backing removed.



2. Before you hand out any tissue, explain that the contact paper is extremely sticky, and may be frustrating and that they will need to plan before they work. Once you put down a piece of tissue you will not be able to get it off.
3. Talk to the participants about the idea of a stained glass window, what emotions does it evoke within themselves. This may make you envision a religious Church window, or others may think of a literal window... is it a window in their house growing up, or their window now? Offer suggestions of what it makes you feel or think of, and ask anyone if they want to share.
4. Discuss the way the light looks as it hits a stained glass window. Once they're finished, their rooms too will be filled with gorgeous colors from their own window creations.
5. Turn on classical piano music in the background, as it is nice to make sure everyone can hear it, ask if they enjoy it and if it make them feel any particular emotions.
6. Explain that you will be passing out tissue to everyone, all the colors of the rainbow. This is time for them to explore with the materials, they can rip it or cut it.
7. This is very individual, and there is no wrong way to create their window.
8. Once they are finished you will come around and help them lay another piece of pre-cut contact paper on top face down, creating a seal.
9. Use black electrical tape to run along the edges, giving a finished look. This extra step of completing their project promotes the feeling of accomplishment among participants.
10. Use the tape to create a small hole or hook for them to hang on their window.

**Teaching Tips and Suggestions:**

- Use encouraging genuine phrases that keep the participants excited about the work.
- Compliment their color choices

- Sit down next to each participant, as you talk to him or her, offer your hand.

## **Styrofoam Printmaking**

### **Materials:**

- Foam board or Recycled Styrofoam (takeout containers)
- Acrylic paint
- Pencil
- White paper

### **Preparation:** Easy

If using take out containers, remove the top of the box and cut into large squares (roughly 8"x8", but any size will work). And have a large space for finished projects to dry.

### **Difficulty:** Easy

**Safety:** Paint is toxic and should not be ingested. Watch participants closely when using paint.

### **Benefits and Sensory awareness:**

- Fine motor-skills: used for drawing into Styrofoam
- Planning ahead: have participants sketch out their design before carving into Styrofoam
- Textile awareness: the soft foam, being able to easily make a mark
- Decision-making: drawing their design, paint color choices
- Promotes: organization, by planning ahead

### **Steps:**

1. After preparing the Styrofoam boards, give a short demonstration how to use the pencil to make an imprint into the foam.
2. Pass out paper and pencils for them to practice if they would like, otherwise, they can move straight to their Styrofoam board.

3. With a pencil draw a line drawing on the board (if they have a hard time pressing hard enough, you can help them go over their design again).
4. Once they're happy with their line drawing, have the artists choose a paint color.
5. With a paintbrush, allow them to cover their image, covering the entire surface.
6. Lay a piece of plain white paper over the painted area.
7. Use a soft fist to rub the paper onto the paint.
8. Remove the paper from the board; you will be left with a negative print of their line drawing.
9. Allow the print to dry.
10. Frame or decorate further if time and finances allow.

**Teaching Tips and Suggestions:**

- Discuss ideas of what to draw beforehand. If participants have a hard time deciding, you can start to make helpful suggestions, or supply a still life for them to view (flowers, fruit, etc.)
- Sit down next to each participant, as you talk to him or her, offer your hand.
- Play soft music.

## Nature Collage

### Materials:

- Old Books
- Old Magazines
- Wrapping paper (optional)
- Glue (Mod Podge)
- Foam brushes
- Paper or canvas
- Leaves and twigs
- Baby wipes (for hands covered in glue)

### Preparation: Easy

Pages of books and magazines can be ripped out ahead of time. Leaves and twigs should be collected beforehand.

### Difficulty: Easy

**Safety:** While Mod Podge is non-toxic, participants may try to eat it (it resembles ice cream), keep a close eye when using the glue.

### Benefits and Sensory awareness:

- Fine motor-skills: used for tearing paper and gluing down pieces
- Textile awareness: Glue on their hands is very sticky. Notice the differences between the smooth papers, and the crunchy leaves or strong twigs.
- Decision-making: How to incorporate nature in the collage, what images from books and magazines to use.
- Promotes: playfulness with messy fingers, and tearing paper

- Encouragement: Participant spontaneity

**Steps:**

1. Discuss the importance of nature: you can have a group discussion about favorite seasons, favorite memories, plants, gardening, etc.
2. Pass out all of the different papers
3. Explain that all materials can be ripped and altered to fit their collage however they would like.
4. Explain to them that the glue is not for eating.
5. Demonstrate using the foam brush to cover their canvas and glue down the papers.
6. Instruct them cover the canvas first with book and magazine papers.
7. Once their canvas is covered pass out the leaves and twigs
8. Explain they will need a little more glue but once it dries their leaves and twigs will remain in place
9. Encourage them to get creative about placement.
10. Once finished, remove to lay flat to dry.

**Teaching Tips and Suggestions:**

- This is a longer project; participants may need encouragement to stay motivated through ripping and gluing down all the paper.
- If glue gets too overwhelming, you can help by using a brush to apply glue on their papers.
- Sit down next to each participant, as you talk to him or her, offer your hand.

### Section Four: Experience

The opportunity to work with the individuals at Senior Access became much more than something to fulfill a requirement in my senior project; it became a life changing experience. By bringing unique classes, designed by myself, into facilities I am able to get first hand experience of how these classes consume patients' time, and bring energy and light into their days. The hands on element of teaching provided a learning experience for me that could not be produced by reading in a book.

With my newfound knowledge of dementia and the characteristics associated with it, I was able to watch closely as I interacted with the students, making note of the differences and benefits I witnessed first hand. The experiences I had were unforgettable, as I developed relationships with the participants. One particular interaction with a patient is especially memorable. I was told that she never participated in prior art workshop, however, I noticed she was playing with a small piece of tissue paper as I was giving instruction. I approached her, put my hand on her back and took a seat next to her. We began chatting, she was rather sarcastic, but a smile remained on her face the entire time. As our conversation continued I learned that as a young woman she attended Berkeley University to study studio art; her specialty was painting portraits. I was engaged, as she shared her stories with me, her eyes grew and the smile began to get wider and wider. She was evidently very proud to share her accomplishments with me. Our connection was genuine, she thanked me for asking and she expressed she was happy to talk about it. The woman's character was strong, after she was done she politely began to brag about how she "still had it" as she continued working on her "stained glass" window.

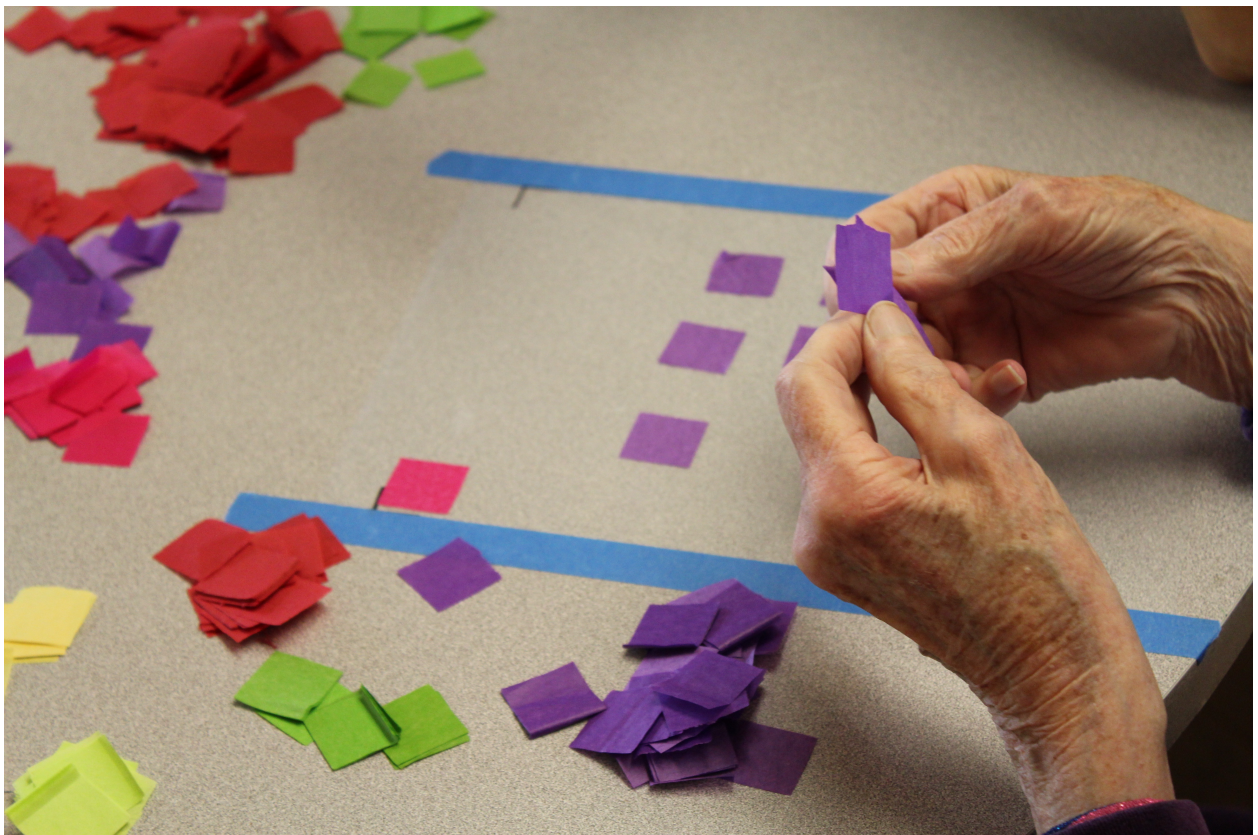
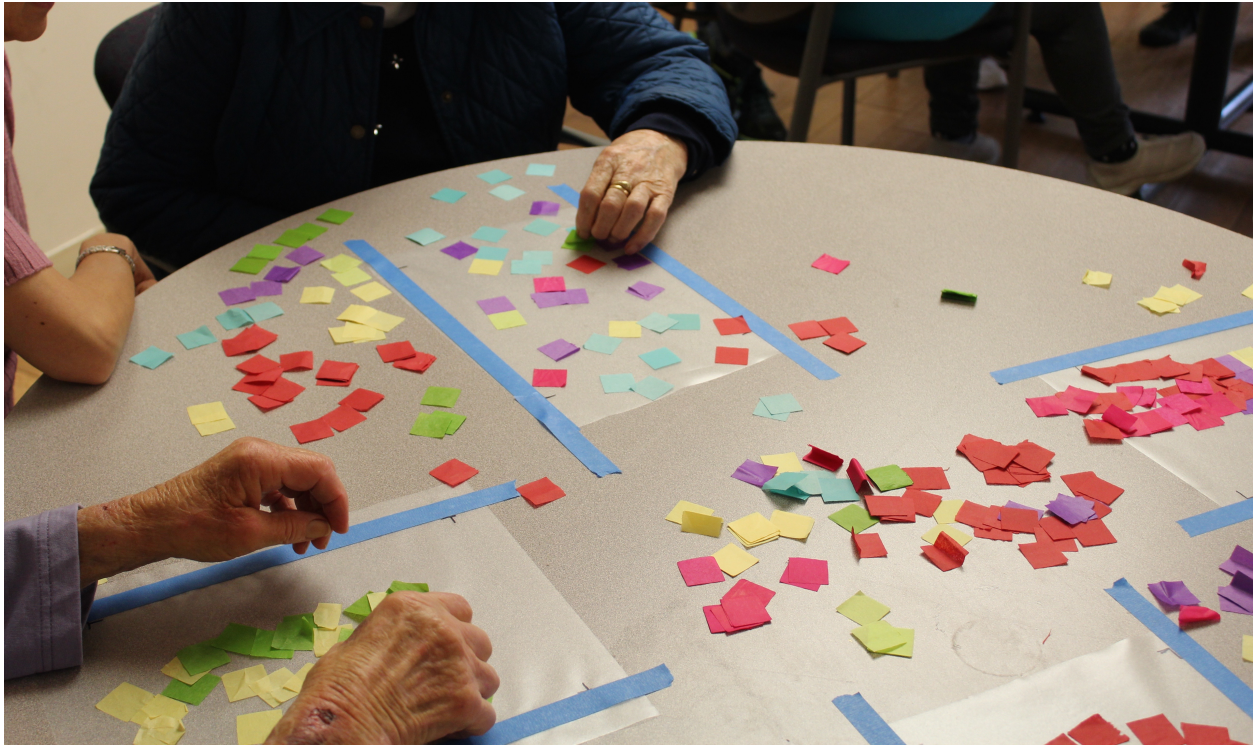
Another individual participating in my workshop was more developed in her diagnosis and had a difficult time placing herself or the others around her. She continued to ask me if she

knew me from “Drake’s café”, I wasn’t entirely sure of where or what that was. I had been told during my daylong workshop with Michelle Burns, to avoid overwhelming emotions for patients such as this, it is quite often better to go along with the question than to further the confusion by explaining that you don’t know them. So I told her yes, I was at Drake’s Café; she smiled, gave me a hug, and we sat together. I asked this woman about the colors on the table she saw, and which were her favorites. Once she felt comfortable with me and we started a dialogue, she wouldn’t stop. We started to talk about patterns, the shape of the tissue, and the sticky quality of the paper. She had a comment about each element and wanted to tell me all about it. She was actively using her imagination, her communication skills, and she was having a wonderful time doing it. It was at this point I had wished for more time with each participant as I could literally see the benefits of creative expression unfolding before my eyes.

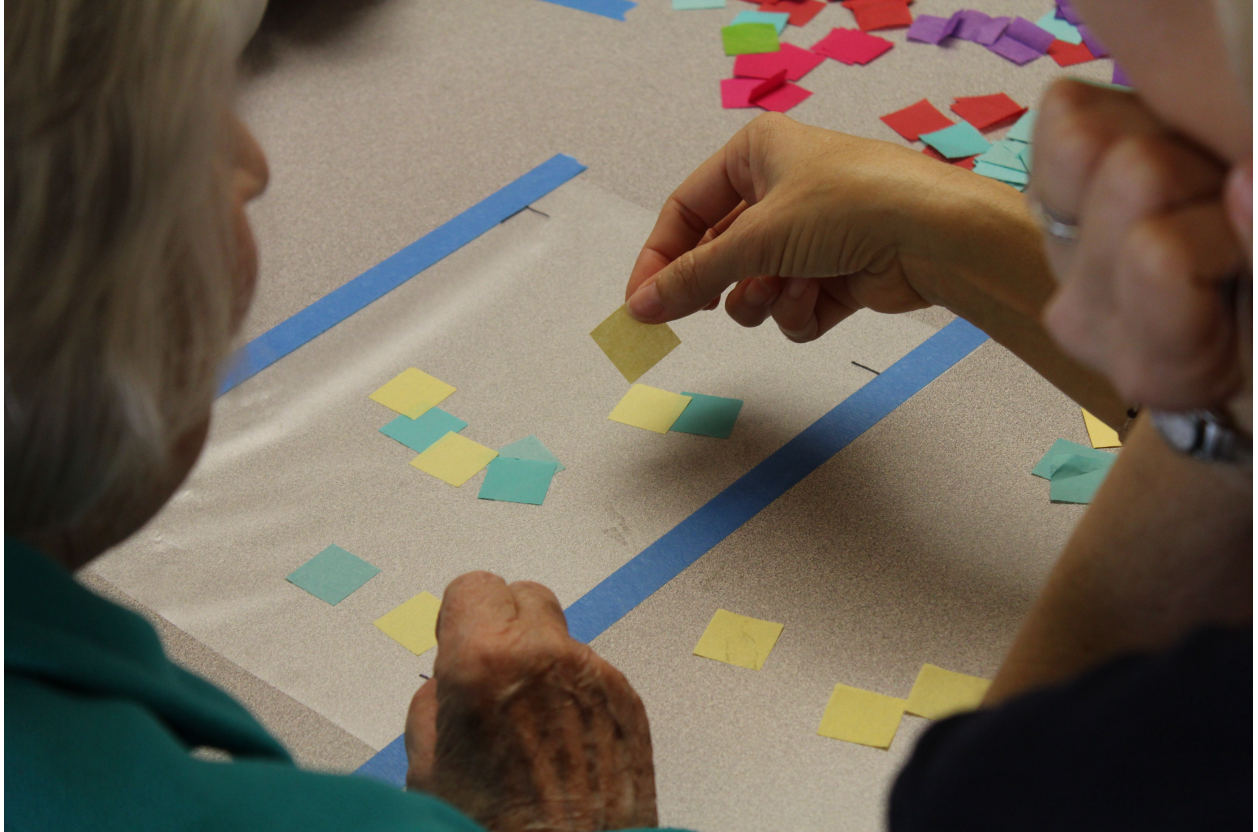
This project, which started, as a hope to advocate for people with dementia, for the power of art, and to dedicate my time to these special individuals became an inspiring and life changing experience for me. The ability to remember your name, recall memories, or have clarity in day-to-day acts is one people take for granted everyday. If there is a tool that is accessible, noninvasive, and easy to do, patients with dementia deserve the right to it. That is creative expression, any artistic outlet that encourages people, activates their mind, and promotes contentment. I am a proponent for art in the home and in elderly care facilities; hoping my research and workshops reach the hands of children, caretakers, and those in need of inspiration.



To protect the artist's privacy, the photos below have been cropped or edited to remove faces.







### Works Cited

- Burns, Michelle. "Communication at the Intersection of Art and Dementia." Sharing the Journey. Senior Access, San Rafael. 28 Mar. 2015. Lecture.
- "California Assisted Living Facilities." *California Assisted Living Communities*. Assisted Living Facilities, 2015. Web. 02 Feb. 2015.
- Hayes, Jill, and Sarah Povey. *The Creative Arts in Dementia Care: Practical Person-Centered Approaches and Ideas*. London: Jessica Kingsley Publishers, 2011. Print.
- Huntsman, Mark. "How Art Therapy Enhances the Quality of Life for Dementia Patients." *Alzheimers.net*. A Place for Mom, Inc., 29 Apr. 2014. Web. 02 Feb. 2015.
- Gross, Susan M., et al. "Creativity and Dementia: Does Artistic Activity Affect Well-being Beyond the Art Class?" 14.1 (2015): 27. Print.
- Magniant, Rebecca C. Perry. *Art Therapy with Older Adults: A Sourcebook*. Springfield, IL: Charles C. Thomas, 2004. Print.
- "What Is The Difference Between Alzheimer's and Dementia?" *Alzheimers.net*. A Place for Mom, Inc., 2015. Web. 02 Feb. 2015.