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Special Needs Students and Long-Term Care Residents Find Common Ground in Art

OLD BRIDGE – To an outsider it was a cheery springtime centerpiece, an ordinary wooden basket playing vessel to an overflow of synthetic tulips.

But to the residents of Roosevelt Care Center at Old Bridge, as well as their youthful visitors, it was a talking point Tuesday – a means to mend a generational gap during what has more recently morphed into a routine art class.

Since late winter, students and faculty of the Rugby School at Woodfield in Wall have made near monthly stops at the long-term care facility, tackling various techniques and art mediums with residents.

“We are a special needs school, so we deal with different levels of abilities,” said Melissa Jensen, a Rugby School art therapist. “What helps us is getting our kids out and letting them socialize. They are enjoying the connection and seeing others benefit from their presence.”

Tuesday’s session, attended by Jensen, five students and an art teacher, brought a dozen or so residents from Middlesex County’s newest long-term care center hands-on instruction in still life watercolor painting.

“I like helping people and art is a way of expressing yourself,” said 15-year-old Rugby student Nick Frisbie. “I’m learning a lot about life experience, people and social skills here.”

Ninety-year-old Roosevelt resident Dorothy Boyer said she’s come to treasure these classes with students, as it takes her back to a different era and time spent with her own children.

“These are the types of programs we love at Roosevelt,” said Middlesex County Freeholder Carol Barrett Ballante, a liaison to the Middlesex County Improvement Authority, the entity that oversees Roosevelt’s operation. “Especially when you see how everyone benefits from the experience. The children bring a sort of energy into the facility and at the same time connect with the older generations, people who are in a way a living, breathing history.”

Rugby School will continue to advocate student interaction with area seniors in the hopes that they will cultivate a life-long interest in similar community service endeavors, Jensen said.

“Art is one of those things anyone can connect with,” she said. “You don’t have to have an ability; and it can also be very cathartic.”

For more information on Roosevelt Care Center and its operations, log onto www.rooseveltcarecenter.com or call 732-321-6800.

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