

the art of caring

We Care Arts: so much more than a studio

By Joyell Nevins

Photo: Erica Gibbs, Betsy Boesch, David Hiday and Jeffrey Bailey pose during an event at We Care Arts in Kettering



We Care Arts, an art studio in Kettering, is not a gallery for famous artists. It's not a paint-your-own-pottery studio for wannabe artists. And it's not even officially a center for art therapy. It is a place where those with mental, physical or emotional disabilities can come and feel accepted—to feel like they're a part of something, to hold things in their hands that they created.

"These people have been beat up so badly by the world, so bullied and disrespected," says program coordinator Shari Hignite. "But when you come here, you're loved, you're respected."

"They know me for who I am today," explains client Steve Nichols.

We Care Arts' mission is "changing disabilities into possibilities through art." Nichols was introduced to We Care Arts three years ago by his friend Nora, who ran a paper route with him. Now Steve and Nora are married, and he is pursuing the goal of becoming a prison minister.

"I want to let them know they can have a life out here and that someone cares," Nichols says.

Showing someone cares and providing a supportive community are some of the main services We Care Arts provides. Client Jeff Bailey, whose favorite medium is decorative painting on wood, makes it a point to say hello and give a hug to everyone when he arrives at We Care and then has a goodbye and a hug or handshake for everyone when he leaves. Bailey's been coming since 2004.

"It's a safe place," says client Sam Carpenter, who's been attending We Care for seven years.

The only criteria We Care Arts has is that those with disabilities must be able to take care of themselves and behave appropriately in a setting with other people. Aside from

that, anyone is welcome. The center has served clients with brain injuries, strokes, aneurisms, birth defects, Down syndrome, autism, developmental disabilities, Asperger syndrome, cerebral palsy, dyslexia, ADD/ADHD, Alzheimer's, anxiety disorder, bipolar disorder, depression, OCD, memory loss, agoraphobia, schizophrenia, diabetes and people who suffer from physical or mental abuse, as well as from other conditions.

We Care Arts just endeavors to help people find their voices after they've lost them.

"The art doesn't need to be Van Gogh, it just needs to be from their soul[s]," says founder and director Terry Schalnat. "They can get it out—they can find their voice[s]."

The center's success rate speaks for itself—in the last 10 years, We Care Arts' numbers have grown from 50 clients to more than 1,300. And many of those people, like Nichols, are now becoming more independent and pursuing career and other life goals.

"This can help more than medication," says Helen Jones-Kelley, executive director of Montgomery County Alcohol, Drug Addiction and Mental Health Services. "[We Care Arts is] providing the right kind of social support. These are the kinds of programs that help people live a quality life."

From a sketch

We Care Arts started more than 30 years ago when Schalnat saw an opportunity to, as she says, "share the healing power of art." Schalnat is not an artist by trade (her work in the corporate world has been mostly in medical research), but by heart.

"I love art," Schalnat says. "I know that when things made me sad, I sat down and drew and whittled, and it made me feel better."

Schalnat also notes the conversations that could happen when working on an art piece.



Kelsey Quinn works on a project

“Just to be able to sit with people who were in a place where they need[ed] support and love, while working, we’d be talking, just sharing (our hearts),” Schalnat says. “It’s very healing.”

So she went to Lutheran Social Services (LSS) with her idea. She was told, if she could find the funding and the facility, she should go for it. In 1983, Schalnat began to offer art classes out of the then Rosie Miller Recreational Senior Center. The center allowed her to use their wood workshop and turned a small storage room into an art space for the We Care students. Schalnat would take pieces made by the clients and do home shows with her friends and their friends.

“It started very small, but the story got out and it just grew,” Schalnat said.

One year later, a gentleman heard Schalnat speak about her mission and donated a residential property in Belmont to We Care Arts through LSS. Then in 1990, six years later, We Care Arts was thrown for a loop. According to Schalnat, LSS had revised its outlook and mission and were going to discontinue the program since they were going in a different direction. But people from eight different churches came to Schalnat and said they would fight for We Care if she would stay.

“They told me we won’t do it unless you stay as director,” Schalnat recalls. “They said, ‘We can’t do this program, but you can.’”



LSS listened, and even though they still removed their social services umbrella, the Lutheran group gave We Care Arts the Belmont building.

Schalnat worked for at least two years without a salary as We Care found its footing. And its footing came largely through excellent staff and volunteers.

“I am a good motivator, and I love people—I can help them reach for the stars,” she said. “But I was never someone who could raise money or do a budget. I have been extremely blessed with people who can teach and help. We’ve been able to make this program grow by people who share this mission with me.”



In the early 2000s, Wright State University funded a feasibility research project for We Care Arts and determined if the facility they used was accessible for people with physical disabilities (Belmont was not) or could house more people (Belmont could only fit 10 at a time), We Care Arts was looking at a possible increase of 300 clients.

So a huge project was undertaken to raise money for a new building—the current facility in Kettering was listed at \$450,000, but We Care Arts was able to buy it for \$180,000 outright. Unfortunately, it had been vacant for a while and was in bad shape.

According to Schalnat, volunteers gave a whole new meaning to the term “elbow grease.” Churches, Rotary groups and the Optimist Club all put up dry wall, installed flooring, painted and performed other tasks to clean the building from the inside out. Many companies donated the building materials. The five-year loan taken out to pay for the repairs was paid off in three years.

“When I think of all the people that helped build this building ... This is a program that belongs to the community,” Schalnat says.

Although its main headquarters is still in Kettering, We Care has branched out to offer regular art classes at satellite locations in Fairborn and Tipp City as well.

What clients do

Hignite says clients are often surprised at the freedom and grace they’re given at We Care Arts. They can work on their own creations at their own paces. Each client can paint a canvas, decorate a wooden object or create a collage.

“I love the freedom here,” says client Kathleen Lorrington, who started at We Care almost 10 years ago. “I get to do my art, and I get some instruction.”

From 1980 to approximately 2004, Lorrington was hospitalized 18 times for mental health problems. Since starting at We Care, she’s only been hospitalized twice.

“I want people to know the impact art has had on my mental health,” Lorrington says.

Lorrington works in music, poetry, sculpture and painting. Along with We Care’s gallery, Lorrington has also had her work featured at Rosewood Arts Centre and ArtStreet.

We Care Arts offers projects in pottery, jewelry, fabric, glass, computer art and paper mache. Clients have even made greeting cards and kitchenware. Many of their products are sold at the We Care Arts gift shop and fundraising events held throughout the year—with 30 percent going back to the artists themselves.

Four teachers are at the center on a daily basis, bolstered by a host of volunteers. Hignite says the main criteria for volunteers is kindness. She says they must be able to be comfortable and flexible. We Care Arts is much less concerned with creating perfect artwork than allowing the artist and person within each client to come out.

“We’ve seen people come out of their shell[s],” Hignite says.

Sometimes it’s little changes: clients who start making eye contact, taking pride in their appearances or holding conversation with others.

Sometimes it’s big changes: Catherine “Cittie” Myers of Kettering says she suffered from several mental illnesses and rarely left her house. Her caseworker recommended she try We Care Arts as a “great way to get outside of myself,” Myers says. Begrudgingly, Myers agreed.

That was in 2004. Now Myers has earned a degree from Wright State University and is a Development Associate for Habitat for Humanity of Greater Dayton. She loves to draw and paint, mainly in patterns.

“I truly believe I would still be at home, self-absorbed in my anxieties, if it wasn’t for We Care,” Myers says. “They have helped me do what I want to do and achieve what I want to do.”

Myers is one of many clients who were recommended to We Care by a caseworker or a family member as a way to remove themselves from isolation. Amanda Ames, who specializes in sculpting and working with her hands, was looking for a creative outlet and a way to get out of isolation.

Now she says, “I love it here. I love the social aspect, and I love learning.”

Others come from the high school programs, like Betsy Boesch.

“I’ve made good friends and have good teachers,” says Boesch, who started when she was attending high school and has continued to volunteer and take classes with We Care.

We Care currently works with 14 high schools in the area. At some, they go into the schools to teach.

“My teachers take a different project each week that they can complete,” Hignite says. “The students get to learn something new and feel proud of what they are able to create.”

Some of the schools participate in “Transition to Work.” According to Hignite, the program helps students learn soft job skills and appropriate behavior. They are transported as one group to the cen-



We Care Arts instructor Sharon Eninger operates a sewing machine with client/artist Erica

ter where they learn to stay on task and finish projects, market their own products and develop social skills, such as interacting with one another and following directions from the teachers and volunteers.

The schools We Care interacts with include Centerville, Fairmont, Stebbins, Tippecanoe, Wayne, West Carrollton, Ponitz, Meadowdale, Stivers, Belmont, Fairborn, Beavercreek, Montgomery County Educational Services Center and Fairborn Baker.

Celebrate your style

If you want a glimpse into We Care's world: to meet some of the clients, see examples of their work, and hear the mission, come to We Care's annual fall fashion show and fundraiser called "Celebrate Your Style." The evening goes from 5:30-7:30 p.m. Wednesday, Sept. 23 at NCR Country Club. The event will include cocktails, appetizers and wearable art, designed by clients themselves.

"In the past, we have done a full style show. This year, the focus is on the accessories that we make here at We Care Arts," Hignite explains. "The models will be wearing scarves, jewelry, purses and other things (clients) have made."

There will also be items for sale such as pillows made with fabric from artists' design. Tickets are \$35.

We Care Arts is located at 3035 Wilmington Pike in Kettering.

*For more information, to purchase show tickets, or to volunteer, please call **937.252.3937** or visit **wecarearts.org**.*

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