

ART IN MIND

By Heather Thomas – The Lightbox

Art in Mind started in 2013 when The Lightbox ran a series of pilot sessions, funded by a one off grant. We took its model from training and research carried out by Arts4Dementia and adapted it for our own particular style and needs. The pilot sessions proved very successful and some of those initial participants still attend regularly. Many remember the sessions, despite other memory problems.

Over this time we have worked with many people who are living with the early stages of Dementia and their carers. We are particularly proud of the work that all our participants produce which is inspired every month by The Ingram Collection of Modern British and Contemporary Art and The Joan Hurst Collection. We encourage carers to come along to the sessions as well, because caring for someone with dementia can be almost as isolating and lonely as the condition itself. The sessions are run once a month and so we give our participants sketchbooks and pencils to encourage their own artwork at other times, as we believe that it can prompt conversations with loved ones when they are back at home.



We choose a different artwork each month to look at, which enables us to work with different materials each time. It could be that we use clay, acrylics, watercolours or sketching materials, anything which lends itself to the original artwork. The idea is that the participants respond to the piece, rather than trying to make a copy of it. The sessions are not designed to have anyone feel that they are not capable or that they feel that they used to be able to do much more, it is about their new expression of creativity.

Our current participants come from a wide range of backgrounds some of whom have never picked up a brush or pencil before and others who have taken part in more art throughout their lives. Both of these work brilliantly in our sessions due to the very nature of getting everyone at some point out of their comfort zone or in some cases 'always' out of their comfort zone, so I am told. Everyone is led and encouraged by our artist Ruth Dupre or myself and our brilliant team of volunteers, without whom we could not provide the service.

Along the way, we have been funded by Arts 4 Dementia, Surrey County Council, local NADFAS groups and now the Paul Hamlyn Foundation. We hope to continue this great work as each time we run a session and I see the joy it brings to all those involved, we know we are doing the right thing. Enabling people who are living with the early stages of dementia to learn a new skill and develop ideas that they may not have used before. Seeing how the family members, carers or supporters respond to their loved ones enjoying themselves and not focussing on any particular problem is worth its weight in gold.



We recently received an email to thank us for our work from a member of the Alzheimer's society who came with a participant to see what we were doing, which I would like to share: (I have changed their names)

'Just wanted to email you to say thank you for this morning. It was so wonderful to see Robert engaged and doing something that he enjoys. As you may have gathered he has trouble with motivation and concentration, so for him to sit for an hour and a half and do a whole painting was really significant. I think it has been an encouragement to Sue as she hasn't seen him like this for a long time. They've had a really tough journey just in getting the diagnosis, let alone the implications of it, so it's lovely for them to be able to do something positive together, and get back a little of what he's lost. And in such an accepting environment – I think Sue can find it quite challenging sometimes with him in public, but I think she could relax with you. It's also so wonderful to have an activity for people with dementia that isn't childish, as this is often the case with activities for the elderly and those with dementia.'