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Art to Life: The Preservation of Personhood

Emily Broman

A sawmiller, veteran, and father from Pickens County, Alabama, Lester Potts was a practical man grounded in his faith and love for his family. But the handiness and helpfulness that had been the hallmark of his persona began to diminish with the onset of Alzheimer's disease at age 70. In the midst of his cognitive impairment and physical debilitation, Lester was losing elements of personal autonomy and sense of self. Because of his condition it was suggested to his family that he visit Caring Days, an adult daycare center specializing in artistic therapies. Lester was reluctant to do so and was only acquiesced into a visit under the impression he would be performing manual labor. And then, Lester Potts began to paint.

As someone who had never before held a paintbrush, his creativity blossomed, and the disinhibition of his cognitive impairment unleashed a previously untapped artistic ability. Memories lost in conventional communication manifested through depictions embedded in Lester's artwork, idiosyncratically familiar objects representing themes within his own life story. His work has since been displayed in galleries across the United States, including the David W. Streets Gallery in Beverly Hills. But more importantly, the artistic process provided a mechanism through which Lester could again participate in the core components of the human experience: learning and engaging in dignifying activity and self expression.

Inspired by his father's transformative experience, Dr. Daniel Potts founded the nonprofit organization Cognitive Dynamics, which focuses on bringing artistic therapies to those with dementia and cognitive impairment. In search of a vector through which a volunteer program could be established, Cognitive Dynamics partnered with the University of Alabama Honors College. Pillars of the Honors College include civic engagement and innovative scholarship, and thus the idea for a service learning course came to fruition as Art to Life, pairing Honors College students with dementia patients who learn to tell their story through original artwork. In order to prepare

for their volunteer experience, students enroll in a semester-long three credit hour seminar. Lectures in this seminar range from symptoms and underlying mechanisms of dementia to theories of art therapy and principles of effective caregiving. Relevant readings and writing assignments provide benchmark opportunities for reference and reflection. One of the primary preparation experiences is the Virtual Dementia Tour®, during which we undergo a dementia simulation to grasp the physical impairments of the adult participants. Appropriately frightening, the simulation is critical to encourage sensitive interactions in order to understand a dementia patient's sensory experience. After five weeks of training, weekly lectures are supplemented with an eight-week art therapy experience, during which we are paired with an adult participant in the community for weekly sessions facilitated by a licensed art therapist employed through the Honors College. Maintaining participant dignity is of the utmost importance; to this end, age-appropriate art materials such as oil pastels, watercolor paints, and clay are utilized as opposed to colored pencils and crayons.

The culmination of our course is a final project in the form of a synthesized life story. Created as a DVD or a story book, the life story project compiles shared memories that surfaced through art therapy as well as family input and personal memorabilia. During the art therapy portion of the semester, lectures focus on life story extraction, authorization, and production. Ultimately, we present our projects to our adult participants and their families in a celebratory dinner at the end of the semester.

Adult participants are identified in partnership with Dr. Potts, as the neurologist from whose patient pool our adults are recruited. As the course director, Dr. Potts also conducts a majority of the lectures and guides course content, while other partners speak to artistic therapies, elements of life story creation, and practices for effective caregiving. Additional partners from the Telecommunications and Film Department – associate professor Dr. Rachel Raimist and a team of student interns – have taught the basics of

documentary film making and relevant technology to design projects of the highest quality. In fall 2012, these film students worked in conjunction with Art to Life to produce a documentary and promotional materials. To handle student recruitment, course logistics, and scheduling, I serve as the course facilitator on behalf of the Honors College; I inherited this role as a previous student, profoundly inspired by my experience.

As a pre-med freshman, I gravitated toward this course in hopes of gaining invaluable patient interactions and an enhanced understanding of Alzheimer's disease. But full engagement in Art to Life required my elevated and truly personal investment in my participant's life story; I exercised vulnerability to a new degree in learning to speak with utmost sensitivity and immerse myself into the world of a dementia patient's wishful perceptions and cruel realities. Such experiential learning unequivocally promoted empathy, distanced from the self-promoting learning in a typical classroom and yet uniquely preparing me for a future in healthcare. Truthfully, though our goal remains to validate our adult participants, as a student I felt validated knowing my involvement held transitive value: bending the trajectory of a life toward the dignity of human experience and honoring an individual's present identity.

Because of the multi-faceted nature of the course, Art to Life attracts students of all disciplines. Aside from the student partners from the Telecommunications and Film Department, my classmates' areas of interest range from medicine and nursing to dance and art history. Ultimately, every student background is valued as each experience functions as a ground upon which they can relate to another individual. As the course director and course facilitator, Dr. Potts and I conduct interviews with prospective students, such that all participating students understand the wholehearted commitment and mature interpersonal skills required to participate.

The course embodies engaged scholarship in that students learn to exercise communication skills and utilize scientific and artistic preparations to fully actualize service potential. Additionally, we are solidifying a research component so that students might reciprocally augment their outreach experience by better understanding the cognitive and behavioral effects of art therapy and the life story preservation uniquely characteristic of Art to Life. Presently, the research employs a

pre- and post-quantitative survey assessment from the vantage point of the caregivers, concerning four relevant parameters of interest: care partner emotions, care partner behaviors, care partner affect, and caregiver responsibility. In identifying the true efficacy of Art to Life, optimizing course components or improving elements of the experience will facilitate a continually dignifying and enriching experience for all involved.

Of course, not all participants will undergo the transformation characteristic of Lester's story, and until valid outcomes can be ascertained, we measure the success of Art to Life on the grounds that participant feedback is marked by a renewed sense of self and enjoyment in connecting with students. And while our adult participants regain some autonomy and livelihood in the process of art therapy, I feel the students remain the ultimate beneficiaries. In our crucially formative undergraduate experience, we practice the art of listening to life stories, assimilating into a new community, and connecting in intergenerational relationships. Ultimately, it is through the investment in promoting awareness and effective caregiving tools to younger generations that Art to Life can continue to advocate for those with Alzheimer's disease.

About the Author

Emily Broman was a University Fellow majoring in Chemical Engineering and Psychology on the premedical track at The University of Alabama when she submitted this article. She is now a student in the Boston University School of Medicine.