

Bringing Art to the Elderly

How student volunteers use art to reach senior citizens



Among the bustle of loud chatter, an elderly deaf senior citizen sits quietly alone, attentively watching others talk and paint. Seeing this, student volunteers help him watercolor, teaching him to use small hand gestures and guiding his hand in the movements of the delicate strokes. Gradually, he begins to seamlessly paint — smiling proudly.

“It’s gratifying seeing the elderly feel included, valued, and fully embrace their creativity,” a volunteer said.

Paly students host various art workshops at the Stevenson House in hopes of improving senior citizens’ mental well-being and combating social isolation by fostering new friendships among the elderly.

Helping as a Chinese translator during the workshops, The Stevenson House activities coordinator has witnessed the art workshops’ positive impacts on the elderly as most of them have limited social interactions on a daily basis.

“The senior citizens often told me that the student volunteers remind them of their grandchildren, so their presence is very heartwarming,” she said. “I was shocked to see those who don’t talk often enthusiastically talking and interacting with the student volunteers.”

As the senior citizens reflect on their experience participating in the art workshops, they share similar sentiments.

“Simply talking and spending time with others has been very fun because I don’t go out often,” an anonymous senior citizen said. “I have made many new friends through these workshops.”

Another senior citizen has shared

similar sentiments, citing these workshops as a chance to learn more about fellow residents.

“I love listening to others’ diverse stories and ideas and sharing my own,” the senior citizen said. “I never knew some of my friends were so creative and good at art.”

Additionally, these art workshops help push the elderly to embrace creativity and explore their imagination.

“I’m not an artist, but I love being challenged through learning to sketch and watercolor,” a third senior said. “When I see my finished art pieces I feel proud of myself.”

The retirement house manager has noticed immense changes in the senior citizens and expresses her gratitude for the art workshops.

“Since many of the elderly here don’t go out often or do many





activities these workshops have immensely helped them find joy and something to look forward to,” the manager said. “You’ve really shown them [senior citizens] the power of expression and art...They’ve become more confident and are not afraid to freely express themselves.”

In addition to participating in watercoloring, senior citizens are also inspired by musical performances put on by student performers. During a Christmas performance, Gunn sophomore Samuel Chen was singing Angels We Have Heard when the entire audience—including the senior citizens, retirement home workers, and other volunteer performers—sang along with him.

“I felt connected to them in a way,” Chen said. “They were there, right with me.”

Gunn Junior Stella Su who also witnessed the special moment, found herself surprised by the sudden interaction.

“It felt like we were making music together rather than just performing for them,” Su said. “When we began the performance it was a little awkward, but the sing-along during the [piece] definitely helped ease the atmosphere.”

Sophomore Joanne Lin, shares similar thoughts as Su. Like Su, Lin has been volunteering in Notes for All, a local initiative that hosts performances in various retirement homes, since late 2023.

Lin particularly appreciates the performance experience she gains from volunteering.

“I’ve learned that as much as we should practice, they [the seniors] aren’t expecting perfection,” Lin said. “While there is some pressure to do well, it’s not overwhelming.”

Although she often plays solo selections, Lin enjoys playing chamber music because it allows her to develop collaboration skills and awareness.

“When in a chamber group, I have to make sure to count and listen around me to ensure that we play together,” Lin said. “Playing chamber music gives you an experience

that you most likely couldn’t get from only playing by yourself.”

Vocalist and junior Aiden Chen enjoys interacting with the senior citizens post-performance. He enjoys listening to the stories senior citizens share as well as being complimented.

“I remember an Asian American lady who said she felt an immense amount of pride in seeing myself and others as successful and strong representatives of Asian identity,” Chen said.

Sophomore Teresa Wang, a fellow performer, looks forward to continuing her volunteering pursuits with Notes for All. Besides

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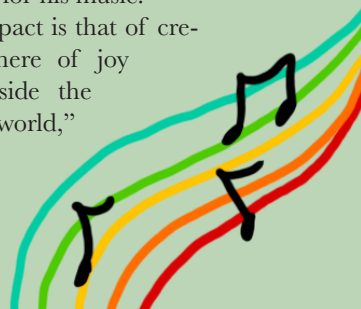
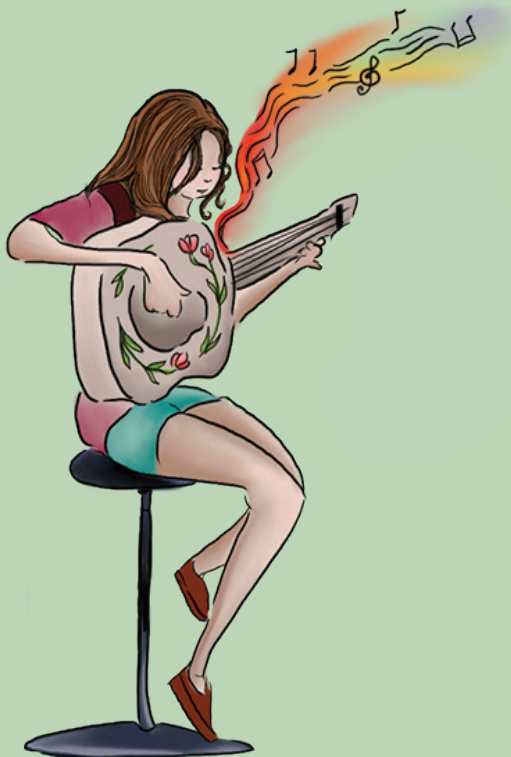
- Retirement Home Manager

playing the piano, Wang helps create posters and other means of advertisement using graphic design.

“It’s fun to meet with new people and have new experiences,” Wang said. “For me, my work in the posters and programs helps provide extra info for the other performers as well as the seniors... In general, I think the seniors enjoy seeing new faces and having people play music for them.”

Chen shares a similar sentiment, citing how performing for seniors has given him a sense of gratitude for his music.

“I hope my impact is that of creating an atmosphere of joy and wonder outside the banality of the world,” Chen said.





A compilation of photos from previous volunteering events hosted by Notes for All and Esther Chung. Photos courtesy of Esther Chung and Sophia Dong.

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