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In paintings, a message: 'I'm still here'

By Peter Schworm, Globe Staff

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BROCKTON -- Sylvia Bickwid can't remember when she painted the picture of a wooded brook that graces her bedroom wall, or if she ever walked along the water-colored seashore that hangs nearby. She fails to recognize the two recent works as her own, though the sight of them brings a comforted smile.

But with a brush in her hand, Bickwid, an 83-year-old whose paintings are now on display in a national exhibit of artists with Alzheimer's disease, can summon her artistic imagination with perfect recall. The most basic facts -- her age and hometown -- now elude her. But she can portray scenes and images with a delicate clarity, her expressive and emotive powers undimmed.

Bickwid, who has midstage Alzheimer's and lives in a Brockton assisted-living facility specializing in dementia care, has painted since she was young. And young, she said, is still how it makes her feel.

"I find it invigorating," she said, eyes alight. "I enjoy it very much."

Bickwid and a score of other artists with the memory-robbing disease created their drawings, paintings, and collages through a program called "Artists for Alzheimer's," created by Hearthstone Alzheimer Care, which runs the Brockton residence and seven others in Massachusetts, New York, and Connecticut. Her work is part of a 45-piece national exhibit, called "Alzheimer's and Creative Expression," which opened last week at the Massachusetts chapter of the Alzheimer's Association in Watertown.

Art therapy for patients suffering from dementia has gained more attention as the ranks of Alzheimer's patients swells. An estimated 4.5 million Americans now have Alzheimer's; by 2050, the number is expected to rise as high as 16 million. As the baby boomer generation ages, the US population age 65 and older is projected to double within the next 25 years, according to the National Institute on Aging.

Hearthstone's president, John Zeisel, said that art and music not only help ease the anxiety, confusion, and frustration common among people with Alzheimer's, they also help them retrieve deeply held memories and creative

impulses that remain intact even as the disease advances. Beyond its therapeutic properties, art may also help strengthen analytical and logical brain functions damaged by the progressive neurological disorder. Zeisel and Paul Raia, director of patient care and family support for the Massachusetts chapter of the Alzheimer's Association, theorize that art can serve as a kind of road map to parts of the brain that govern memory and communication, a kind of detour around the disease.

"You can get to reason through emotion," Zeisel said.

Just as important, art gives people with Alzheimer's a rare chance at self-expression and a sense of mastery and accomplishment. Many paintings in the national exhibit seem to convey an insistent defiance of intellectual decline, a demand by the creators for recognition as vital, vigorous individuals

"Many of the artists are simply saying, 'I'm still here,'" Raia said. Creating art may provide people with Alzheimer's feelings of control and command in a world that is increasingly forbidding and unfamiliar, he said.

Indeed, several other paintings seem to hint at an intense need for order, but also reflected the artists' ability to organize their work into a cohesive whole.

"Alzheimer's distorts reality in so many ways, but the art pieces all have definite structure," Raia said, looking at a striking abstract painting of a woman sitting in a high chair. "You don't see the same level of disorientation in their artwork that you would in their cognitive ability."

Raia and Zeisel said they hope the exhibit will show that people with Alzheimer's can continue to live productive lives. While the disease gradually destroys memory and thinking skills, the exhibit shows that expressive and emotional capacities survive far longer, they said.

"So many people say there is no self" in Alzheimer's patients. Zeisel said. "But you can see them in their art. They're there."



Sylvia Bickwid attending "I'm Still Here: Alzheimer's and Creative Expression" exhibition with Christina Galanis, Executive Director, Hearthstone Alzheimer Care at Heights Crossing, Brockton, MA

Bickwid, for instance, grows animated in discussing her art, which she said is at once soothing and frustrating - "if I can't get it exactly right."

And while she no longer recalls the origin of some of her own work, she quickly recognizes photographs of two of her young relatives. Perhaps they would pose for a portrait?

"They are cuties," she said. "But I'm not sure if they'd sit still long enough."

For more information about the exhibit or the Alzheimer's Association, visit www.alzmass.org or call 800-272-3900. Peter Schworm can be reached at schworm@globe.com.
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For more information on the Artists for Alzheimer's Program, please visit www.thehearth.org or call 888-422-CARE

