



## **“Well, that was perfect!”**

I have the pleasure of running Creative Mojo workshops and being part of the creative lives of residents in care homes and community groups. Our themed projects offer even the most reluctant of group members the chance to explore their creativity at their own pace, feel valued and be part of a fun and meaningful experience.

Recently at one of my newer care homes' for older people with varying stages of dementia I noticed a gentleman in the lounge who had two of his family visiting with him. On arrival I did a quick walk around the space and greeted everyone, before going about setting up for our session. I approached some of the ladies and gents, covering the small coffee tables in front of them with newspaper and asking if they'd like to join in the session and get creative with me. There were 9 or 10 residents in the lounge and at first I didn't approach the gentleman as he had family with him and I did not want to disturb them as they chatted.

I started off by showing some of the residents in the lounge the beautiful bright photo's of Poinsettia flowers and our fabulous selection of layered flower shapes that we would be painting and using to create a beautiful group poinsettia basket display. It was only when a few of the ladies around this gentleman had dipped their brushes into the individual paint pots at their tables and were chatting and exploring the shapes and colours they had, that I realised that he and his family were talking about the painting and were curious about what we were doing.

I'm always keen to engage new residents and so eagerly gathered some photos and flower shapes to explain the project to the gentleman and his family. I had not met this gent, 'S', before and so introduced myself. I often try to help people remember my name by explaining it's a bit different as I am 'Kym with a y' not 'Kim with an I', and funnily enough it turned out this gent had a grand daughter called 'Kym with a y' too!

As we spoke I could tell 'S' was an outgoing and friendly man, keen to meet new people, making eye contact and smiling widely, despite not always being able to find his words and sometimes making rhythmic sounds or just saying different individual words before laughing and smiling. His family were very encouraging and helped set the scene, suggesting he have a go at painting and see what happened. 'S' didn't initially try to pick up or take the paint brush once I had crouched down beside him and showed him the shapes and how we would be layering the flowers at the end. As with other residents I've worked with who have dementia he did not move to try to take the brush from the pot or my hand but was animated and chatting and making eye contact with us. Instead I asked if he would like to hold the paint brush and offered it to him at an angle pointing away from him so that he could grasp it like a pen to get started. He did this but, again in common with other people I worked with, he started to turn the brush around in his hand so that the pointed wooden end bit was facing down.

Now I can see why this would make sense in many ways, as the blue wooden brush narrows at the top to a thinner tip, very much like a pen or pencil. However given that there was red paint all over the now top of the brush, close to his cardigan, I gently suggested we turn the brush around again to have the paint face downward. 'S' was happy to do so, especially when I held the shape in my hand and lifted it closer towards him and the brush to show him the red brush strokes that he would make. This made him smile even more broadly and he laughed and joked with his family, looking at them and then going back to the shape and

his brush, considering where he would place the next brush stroke. This took some time as he hovered the brush over a few positions on the shape and with some encouragement from his family, and reassurance from myself, explaining he could place the brush down anywhere on the shape, he then made another couple of short red lines on the flower shape. Again another satisfied laugh and twinkle in his eye as he stopped and proclaimed "That was perfect!" We smiled and agreed that it was indeed perfect.

Throughout the hour session I popped back and forth from 'S' and his family to see how he was progressing. At times he wasn't painting at all, and had happily laid down his brush on the shape. On a couple of occasions I asked if perhaps we could add a different colour to the shape and he nodded and agreed. Changing the colour to green gave 'S' another focus and the contrast of the two colours on the shape seemed to please him as he added a few determined and well thought out green marks to the card. It was lovely to see him concentrate and focus on the flower shape and the brush and by now there was no need to support him with using the brush side of the handle, as he held it expertly while he considered the next place for a mark. These brush marks may have been few and far between over the hour we painted but 'S' continued to be engaged, laugh and make jokes with his family and other residents. As his son said "The important thing is he is having fun". And I whole heartedly agree. To me, and to S, that is exactly how taking part in creative arts is indeed "perfect".

So often we are taught to strive for perfection and many of us are therefore worried about getting involved or "doing it wrong". For people with dementia this is a very real worry and frustration and there can be constant day to day reminders for them of doing things 'wrong', from forgetting or mixing up someone's name, knowing the name of something but saying the wrong word, doing up the buttons on a cardigan wrong, going into the wrong bedroom by mistake - the list goes on. For me the secret and beauty of taking part in art and exploring creativity for people with dementia is that there can be no wrong way to do it. The fear of doing it wrong may still be there as the person hesitantly gets involved but with reassurance and encouragement this fear is usually eclipsed by the individual's innate creativity and the group's acceptance.

How can it be wrong if we are engaging with and taking time to smile, encourage, talk to and be with individuals? How can it be wrong if individuals are given the opportunity to belong, have purpose, work together, make contact with their neighbour sitting next to them, get creative and "play" without rules? And how can it be wrong if individuals, like 'S' are engaged, smiling and making their own unique mark? While 'S' never 'finished' his shape completely and left large white spaces on the shape, he was definitely engaged and onto something. When his white and red and green flower shape was added to the rest of the ladies lovely shapes and the final piece came together, 'S', the staff and the ladies and gents who took part smiled broadly at their beautiful creation. To them and to me it did indeed look "perfect".



Handy tips:

- Try to use a contrasting background to the shape to be painted. For those who can't reach a table or who may have depth perception issues, I tend to use dark coloured off cuts of board and stick down the white shapes (so they don't move around) for the individual to hold themselves.
- Take your time with individuals when you can. The outcome/end product you have in mind isn't always what is important. Of course it helps if the final art piece is beautiful (and 9/10 it will be!) but taking part in creative activities is an individual experience for all of us, including people with dementia. It turned out that 'S' had been an engineer and this tied in with his careful thought and consideration of the shape and the colours and where he was going to put the brush marks. There are so many amazing benefits before the art is even completed no matter what the actual individual piece or group piece of art ends up looking like. The process of setting up, talking together about the project, sharing wonder and pleasure at the beautiful photos and the lovely colours of the paints, comparing painting techniques with a neighbour, helping focus the mind and improve hand/eye co-ordination as the individual holds the brush, puts paint on the brush, moves the shape around, chooses a colour. All these steps, these small steps that can be glossed over and sped through quickly so that the art piece can be finished, are so important and powerful. Little moments like helping S hold his paint brush and make his first brush stroke, these are more important than churning out and finishing shapes quickly or neatly or perfectly.
- There is no right or wrong – a shape with patterns or half finished or with paint not reaching the corners is valued and can be incorporated in the final piece. If possible try not to 'finish off' their work and paint to the edges to make it look perfect. Always ask first if you do make changes or add to their piece, I often ask and joke about how good our team work is.
- Don't be afraid to ask and encourage that one resident who doesn't normally join in, or who isn't into art or getting messy, or who has been asleep for half an hour of the session and then wakes up, if they would like to join in. Often the reply may be no. But at least they have been asked, they have been involved in a small way and they have been able to exercise their choice and right to say no. And sometimes, the answer will be yes. Which is amazing, even if they start and don't finish, or eagerly paint the newspaper more than the shape, or put the brush down after the first half of a shape - there are always benefits for the individual from being involved and taking part.

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