

# Painting brings joy to elderly Sisters with dementia

By CHRISTOPHER GAUL  
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One by one, the elderly Sisters enter the recreational room, most of them in wheelchairs, one shuffling slowly with the aid of a walker. It's Thursday, but a very special day for these retired women religious who live at The Villa, many of whose minds have been dulled by the debilitating consequences of Alzheimer's disease or other kinds of dementia.

They are well cared for at the joint retirement convent of the Sisters of Mercy and the Mission Helpers of the Sacred Heart on Bellona Avenue, but in many instances their unwelcome companion is depression, a side effect of their condition.

But you wouldn't know it from their expressions when they spot Elizabeth Cockey, an occupational art therapist who brings them paint, paper and joy every Thursday afternoon.

Sister Kathleen Mary Luke Brosnan, O.S.F., smiles as Ms. Cockey greets her and other Sisters who gather around tables set up with water colors, paper and other art supplies.

Sister Mary Luke likes to paint cardinals and bluebirds, and Ms. Cockey helps her begin, letting her mix the paint and gently suggesting colors the Sister can use.

"Most of them can't see very well or hear very well, and they have moderate or more serious cognitive disorders, like Alzheimer's," Ms. Cockey explained, "but they respond so well to these sessions. They love me and I love them."

Ms. Cockey said she sees "remarkable improvement" in the Sisters' condition. "Most of them were very depressed, but art therapy seems to relieve their depression by at least 50 percent over time," Ms. Cockey said.

"You know, most of them were teachers, some principals," she said. "If I'm a minute or two late, I see one Sister looking at her watch as I come through the door. 'You're late,' she says, 'where have you been?' Suddenly, I'm 10 years old again."

Ms. Cockey, a resident of Roland Park who attends The Cathedral of Mary Our Queen, is a motivational speaker for the Alzheimer's Foun-

dation and consultant for retirement communities.

She was so inspired by her relationship with one of her students, a woman suffering from Alzheimer's, that she wrote a book about her, called "Gertrude's Cupboard: Recapturing Minds Stolen by Disease."

In her book, Ms. Cockey said she is "trying to reveal what we already know; humanity is alive and flourishing in the hearts and minds of every human being, even those once considered to have lost everything to brain disorders."

The book recounts Ms. Cockey's most trying years, facing financial instability and the attempted suicide of her eldest son. At the time, Ms. Cockey said she felt alone, helpless and unsuccessful. Support came from the most unlikely source, her student Gertrude, a woman with dementia. While Ms. Cockey revives her through art, Gertrude harbors a secret that helps Ms. Cockey through the most difficult time of her life.

"She prays for people," Ms. Cockey said, "and through her prayer



CR/Christopher Gaul

An elderly Sister works on her painting during an art therapy course at The Villa, the joint retirement convent of the Sisters of Mercy and the Mission Helpers of the Sacred Heart on Bellona Avenue.

and her strong Catholic faith, she restored my faith."

Ms. Cockey's class "has brightened the entire facility and many individual lives, too," said Suzanne L. Carson, The Villa's administrator.

What Ms. Cockey strives for in her classes, and which she always seems to achieve, is to bring about an expressiveness that often fills a void so common with the elderly."

She calls it "joy."