HEALING THROUGH ART
ART STUDENTS CREATE WITH RESIDENTS IN CARE CENTER

Ever since she was a young child, Lucia Esposito ’11 has used art to express herself. After three years as a ceramics major at the Hartford Art School (HAS), she realized she wants to use art to help others express their voices. She decided she wants to become an art therapist.

As a first step toward that career, Esposito enrolled in HAS Assistant Professor Cat Balco’s new Arts in Healthcare course for the spring semester. Once a week, students in Balco’s class visited the Wintonbury Care Center, a rehabilitation and skilled-nursing facility in Bloomfield, Conn., to work with residents on painting, drawing, and sculpting projects.

Because Balco decided to have her students work with the same people every week, Esposito and her resident partner, Mario, were able to form a friendship.

“I didn’t want them to just pop in and do a project but to develop a relationship with someone,” says Balco. “Their job as facilitators is to find a project that engages the residents on their own terms. I tell my students to take advantage of their partners’ interests, their facilities, their coordination, and in some way wake up that life inside of them.”

Esposito helped Mario make animal sock puppets and put on a puppet show during which the animals tell jokes. She made a video so he could remember their time together after she graduated.

Balco’s class also included visits from several artists and art therapists who spoke about their artmaking processes, and the class took field trips, including one to the Connecticut Children’s Medical Center in Hartford. The students used the lessons from the professional experts to help them connect with the Wintonbury residents and bring out their artistic sides.

“It’s so inspiring for me to see all this creativity from people who may have done little or no art,” says Allison Litera ’12, an illustration major. “People have opened up a lot.”

Esposito also noticed a change after a few visits. “When I first walked into the center, everyone was shy and modest about making art,” she says. “After a while, when we walked in, they were happy to see us and wanted to make new things every day.”

Balco has no doubt that art has a healing power. “We’ve heard from artists who are also cancer survivors,” she says. “They’ve talked about how the experience of being sick was a viscerally important transformation for them as artists. And we’ve heard from other individuals who have seen art heal people psychologically and physically.”

The residents are not the only ones benefiting. Danielle Brown ’13 is now a visual communication design major in HAS, but she had taken some time off from art early in her college career. The Arts in Healthcare class helped rekindle her love of art, and now she is considering becoming an art therapist.

“My favorite part is watching someone create, seeing what they come up with, even the simple things like how they handle the brushstrokes,” says Brown. “I like seeing the ideas they come up with, what colors they choose, and how art makes them feel.”

As for Esposito, she is even more certain about her goal of becoming an art therapist. “I love to go into Wintonbury and reach out and put smiles on their faces. We know they are feeling a sense of self-worth and that we are lifting their spirits.”