

## ARTIST SPOTLIGHT Community Outreach Artist-Instructors

*This is a story about the power of art to enhance and sometimes transform lives, told through the experiences of our Outreach artist-instructors. Each artist works with a different audience served by the Minnetonka Center for the Arts Outreach Program: adults with disabilities, seniors with memory loss and underserved children and teens.*



**Michèle  
Coppin**

During one Presbyterian Homes memory care art class, an elegant and very proper fellow of 97 years was listening to Artist-Instructor Michèle Coppin talk about France and Matisse as she showed them colorful paintings she did for her thesis. All of a sudden he started speaking French! He was as startled as everyone else, saying, “I didn’t know!” but spent the rest of the session happily tossing words and phrases back and forth with Michèle. It was gone again by the next class but that moment, triggered by the art, was magical.

“I find the connection between art and memory fascinating,” says Michèle, who received her M.F.A. from the Pratt Institute in New York. “They tell me they don’t know how to paint, but then they get into it and they can take off on their own and be extremely creative!” While Michèle loves the artwork her students produce, she knows that sometimes it’s not the art that is important. “I wish someone would come in and take photos of them before the class and after, because physically they stand up a little straighter, their cheeks are rosy, they’re more animated and active,” she says with delight.

Her art classes pull seniors challenged by memory loss out of their isolation. While their hands are busy, they chat, help each other and share stories triggered by the sensory stimulation of the art.

Once Michèle introduced mandalas, circular art forms that in Hindu or Buddhist practice are meditative representations of the universe. She brought some patterns for them to color. It was not successful. A month later, she introduced music, encouraging the class to relax, enjoy the beautiful rhythms and let their imaginations go as they painted. One after the other, what did they create? Mandalas! It was the most natural thing in the world, but had to come from within.

Describing her students as resilient and courageous, Michèle reflects, “It must be scary to not know where you are most of the time or not recognize the people who are around you. Yet they have humor, they are smiling, they’re friendly and sweet and so full of kindness.”

To ensure their enjoyment and success with their projects, Michèle shows them each tiny step, getting to eye level to make it personal and engaging. She encourages family and loved ones to get involved to enjoy the connection and memories that come up as well as make some new ones to cherish.



“We’re all headed in that direction of old age,” Michèle reminds us. “It benefits the whole society really to treat our older people well, with dignity and respect. Programs like these elevate the quality of life.”