

## **Art For Life sparks connection and community during coronavirus pandemic**

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Word count: 562

Artist Melissa Gordon kneels on the sidewalk outside Evergreen Place and Assisted Living in Ellendale, patiently pressing great swaths of green and goldenrod into the pavement.

Some residents watch from the windows. Others sport protective masks and monitor Gordon's progress from a safe distance. Under their watchful eyes, a pastoral scene featuring a big red barn and a pair of towheaded kids in candy apple cowboy boots emerges.

The image resonated deeply with the viewers. Many spent most of their lives on farms and ranches and the drawing brought back memories. They had requested the images in Gordon's artwork, but the final product was a surprise.

"Everybody was talking about it, how excited they were," says Cyndal Glynn, a registered nurse at Evergreen Place. "They kept checking in. It gave them a lot of joy to go out and see something that's outside the norm, especially given the quarantine."

Gordon's vibrant chalk drawings also grace Prince of Peace Care Center in Ellendale and Good Shepherd Home in Watford City. At Prince of Peace, delicate pink and purple blossoms, yellow hearts and words of encouragement spill across the sidewalks that usher residents to a popular outdoor courtyard. At Good Shepherd, she created personalized chalk marker drawings directly on residents' windows.

The projects look different, since they're based on resident requests. But they share a common purpose. All three facilities used their Art for Life Grants from North Dakota Council on the Arts to cultivate connections and a sense of community for seniors during the time of coronavirus.

"Socialization is such a big part of their day, so to maintain those guidelines of distance but to keep them engaged with their families and each other has been a challenge," explains Alicia Glynn, Evergreen Place housing manager. "It was something to talk to their families about. It was neat for them to share that connection with each other, too."

The projects also gave residents a chance to recall some of their favorite memories. Gordon, who is perhaps best known her portrait of Sitting Bull in the Bismarck Art Alley, said she particularly enjoyed transforming each resident's memory into a unique work of window art.

"There's a whole story in each room," Gordon says. "That triggers another memory and they're able to communicate and share some of those stories."

These individual works of art set off a flurry of conversations between staff, residents and family members, who viewed the images from outside the building. The images depicted are as diverse as the residents themselves.

“It might have been their favorite flower or bird, a flag in honor of their military service, a story of them spending time in the Badlands, a picture of their barn on their farmstead, or a picture of the logo of the business they used to work at with their spouse,” says Kristin Rhone, activity director at Good Shepherd Home. “They were all so unique.”

Those connections, conversations and memories are a vital part of the service that long-term care facilities provide. During times of social distancing, they’re more important than ever.

“By doing art programming with our residents, we are able to fight the loneliness, helplessness and boredom which can often be associated with those living in nursing homes,” says Rhone. “Art helps us take care of the resident as a whole, and helps us honor them – mind, body and soul.”