

The Art of Friendship

By Donna Boen '83 MTSC '96



Ryan and Sheila

"All individuals need to be surrounded by people who care for their well-being, engage in social interaction, and have activities that stimulate the mind."

— OMA student volunteer

Waiting at one of several tables, most of them occupied by residents like her, Sheila smiles as Ryan walks into the nursing home's sunny rec room with 11 other Miami University students. He goes to her side, unfolds a campstool, places it so that their chairs nearly touch, and sits down next to her. As he starts to help her fill out her name tag, Sheila jokes and guffaws, coming up with several silly names for herself before settling on "Angel." She makes him write that down. A bit of a tease, she also keeps telling him to look for the wings on her back.

For the next 90 minutes, Ryan, good humored and gentle, helps her with her art project. He smiles and prompts her with questions. She emphasizes her points with hearty punches to his left arm. When project leader Chris comes to their table and offers her a choice of red, yellow, or blue watercolors, Ryan lets her study the vibrant paints for a long time. He finally suggests that maybe she'd like to begin with blue. She can always change colors or start over with a fresh piece of paper. She likes that idea. She likes blue. And she likes painting with Ryan.



The Relationships

"Working with people with dementia each week reminds me that there is value and talent in each and every person."

— OMA student volunteer

Ryan Martini is a senior from Cincinnati majoring in integrated mathematics education and minoring both in American literature and in gerontology. He has been volunteering with Miami's Opening Minds through Art program since 2010.

Better known as OMA, the Dutch word for grandmother, the 6-year-old program pairs volunteers with older people in moderate to late stages of dementia. The majority of its volunteers are Miami students, and most of the students are recruited through classes requiring participation in service-learning projects. Students often stay with OMA even after they fulfill their requirement.

One such student is Chris Napier '12. Double majoring in mathematics education and mathematics and statistics, he saw volunteering with OMA as a chance to integrate art into his college curriculum. Now teaching math at Hamilton High School, he has many fond memories of interacting with "the artists."

"My first partner I was with for any length of time was Evelyne, a retired schoolteacher who actually worked with my grandparents, although I didn't know that at the beginning."

On some visits, he would have to introduce himself several times a session if she became especially engrossed in her art project. That didn't bother the Somerville, Ohio, native, who is now encouraging his high-school students to become involved in OMA, a program dear to his heart after volunteering for six semesters.

"It was just amazing to see the smile on Evelyne's face every time I would introduce myself," Napier said. "Automatically, there is a bond, and you're ready to go."

The Reason

"I've come to appreciate and admire my partner for her strength and positivity."

— OMA student volunteer

What was easy for Napier was difficult for Elizabeth "Like" Lokon MAT '93 PhD '97 MGS '08 – at least in the beginning. Before she founded OMA, Lokon was a master's student in Miami's gerontological studies program. She didn't know anything about dementia or anyone with it, and the more she studied it, the more she feared it.

"I can probably handle a wheelchair, I can probably handle impaired eyesight or hearing, but I cannot dare thinking I'm going to lose my mind. So, because it was something I was afraid of, I immersed myself among people with dementia to see



Elizabeth "Like" Lokon MAT '93 PhD '97 MGS '08

how they think, how they operate, how they respond. The end result is ... I'm not afraid of it. I discovered the essence of human potential in people with dementia."

Called Like (pronounced Leeka) by nearly everyone, she talks about the evolution of her program in her third-floor Upham Hall office, which features framed OMA artwork on every wall. Now an adjunct associate professor and research associate with Scripps Gerontology Center, she's just down the hall from the esteemed center, designated an Ohio Center of Excellence in 2011.

Scripps has supported OMA since its birth when Lokon started with one site and non-student volunteers. In contrast, last year OMA was offered at six sites with the assistance of 113 Miami students and 29 non-student volunteers. Miami's Office of Community Engagement and Service also is a big supporter of the program.

"What I learned from doing OMA is you're not disconnected," said Lokon,

who has a warmth and charisma about her that attracts students and artists to her like glitter to glue. "Only certain parts are altered and changed and impaired, but there are multiple ways you can express your sense of self and connect to other people, so it's not so isolating of a disease. And that's what I think students learn too. You can really become friends and really have a meaningful, two-way relationship."

After studying other art programs for the elderly, Lokon decided to design hers differently. Instead of one facilitator standing up front giving instructions, she envisioned volunteers working one-on-one with artists. She also wanted to assure the artists that there was no right or wrong, no lines to color inside of, no vase of flowers to copy, no way to fail. Instead, she intrigues them with bold mixes of colors and unconventional tools, such as golf balls, Q-tips, and aluminum foil, to pique their curiosity.

"Every project has the element of choice, and the reason is they are normally not given any choice because



it takes too long," she explains. "But when you ask them their opinion, you're saying, 'Your opinion matters, it's valuable, and I'm waiting here for you to make a decision.' This type of self-esteem building is missing in everyday life with people with dementia. All of this is to give them the sense they can do things and it builds confidence."

The Research

"Before OMA, I talked to them like children. Now I know the most important thing is to make them feel important and show that their life still means something to someone."

— OMA student volunteer

To judge OMA's effectiveness, Lokon is researching its impact. For an upcoming article in the Journal for Intergenerational Relations, she collaborated with Jennifer Kinney, a Miami professor of gerontology and Scripps Research Fellow; and Scripps Director Suzanne Kunkel to share findings after analyzing 300 journals by 59 OMA student volunteers.

In the article, they state: "Students felt rewarded for making a difference in the lives of others, even if it was only for a brief moment. Their attitudes toward elders in general and elders with dementia in particular became more positive, and they developed both insights and skill to interact with people with dementia in ways that promote dignity and autonomy. They were able to build genuine reciprocity with their elder partners through these relationships and learn more about themselves and about life."

The three researchers also want to determine whether OMA benefits the artists. Because it's difficult to interview

people with dementia – they can't remember what they did or may not be able to express verbally what they thought – Lokon videotapes them working on their art. Then about a dozen people – trained undergraduates, interns, and faculty – examine these taped expressions and make notes on whether they show engagement, pleasure, and social interest or appear disengaged, confused, sad, frustrated, or angry.

"We want the artist to be engaged, enthusiastic," Kinney said. "We want them to be able to have sustained attention and do a task. We want them to be in the experience, in the here and now creating and having a good time."

Among other questions the researchers have is whether it is the art that is so beneficial or the fact that the artists are participating in an experience where students treat them with respect. Does art have to be involved? Another question for future research is whether benefits of OMA extend beyond the session itself. For example, after the students leave are the artists more talkative, less disruptive, sleeping better?

As for now, the three write in their journal article, "It is evident from these students' journals that elders with dementia gained not only a new role as an artist but also as a teacher and a friend to younger people in the OMA program."



The Rewards

"I think that OMA has changed some of my attitudes and beliefs of aging. It no longer seems as grim as I once thought."

— OMA student volunteer

Like nearly everyone associated with OMA, volunteer Krysta Falasca '12, a linguistics major from Cleveland who is now with the Peace Corps in Africa, has kept one piece by her art partner, Helen, to hang on her wall. Her "Helen" is a watercolor with "sporadic" red, yellow, and orange covered in glitter. Helen was in the late stages of dementia and unable to speak at times, so Falasca learned to keep her company without conversation, even if that meant simply tapping Helen's hand.

A team leader and site manager by the time he graduated, Napier has an "Evelyn" and a "Herman" to remember his first two artists. He also has a picture by Ed, one of Napier's more "colorful" artists.

"I couldn't get him into the project no matter what I did," Napier said. "I'd go over and talk with him and say, 'Do you want to do this?' 'No.' 'Do you want to put on an apron?' 'No, those are for women.' So we just sat and talked and we kind of observed everyone else working. We talked about what they

were doing so we still used the art as a catalyst for conversation. He would always want to observe and comment and tease. That first week, Ed let it be known who he thought was the more attractive college girl. When asked to choose between two pieces of art, instead he said he would choose between the two people holding the art."

At the end of every semester, OMA hosts an art show to celebrate the artists' accomplishments. Volunteers often get into bidding wars over their favorite pieces. Families buy a great deal of the art as well so that every child and grandchild will have a memento.

"The more people can understand the creative capacity of people with dementia, the more they can appreciate the humanity of people with dementia," Lokon said. "Of course you want to give them meaningful, creative activity, but the bigger agenda is about social change."

By Donna Boen '83 MTSC '95, editor of Miamian. Photos are by Peter Magolda, Miami professor of educational leadership, whose dad, Charles Magolda, was an OMA artist. To hear about OMA from student volunteers, go to www.MiamiAlum.org/Miamian and click on link in upper right. Video courtesy of director Noah Applebaum and cinematographer AJ Rickert-Epstein '05, who are producing a documentary on OMA tentatively titled "Ageless Art." Additional material on OMA can be found at www.scrippsoma.org.

