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Students from Laratelier Art Studio volunteer at Aegis Living Moraga

By Emma Wong



From left: Teen volunteers Lilia Maharbiz, Nora Kalmar, and Lily Kalmar hold up senior residents' paintings. Photo Emma Wong

With a few careful brushstrokes, high school junior Lilia Maharbiz gazes at a masterpiece - a sprawling assembly of purple flora. A warm smile is visible, even through the mask she dons. But this creation isn't hers to claim - the senior woman beside Maharbiz is the painter, proudly signing her name on the canvas.

On a cloudy Jan. 20, three students of the Laratelier art studio visited Aegis Living Moraga to guide senior residents through a painting lesson. The volunteer session is one of several proposed by Laratelier founder and Orinda resident Lara Horoupian, who, after volunteering at Aegis herself, urged her students to sign up.

"I was inspired by one of my students who was interested in volunteering at different places with seniors," Horoupian said. "I thought this was a good opportunity to create art together, where the young meet senior generations and bring joy to them. I

reached out to the closest place, Aegis. As soon as you walk in, it's like you're in a different world."

Each session differs, with seniors working with a variety of art mediums including paint and clay. "It's a unique way to volunteer," four-time participant Maharbiz said. "This time we volunteered at the Life's Neighborhood, which provides memory care services for those with advanced cognitive deficit."

"I love helping people along with doing art. This felt like a good combo and a way to give back to the community," junior and first-time volunteer Lily Kalmar said.

Junior Sophie Avery and senior Alexis Gottschalk, who have both taken part in past events, agree. "I jumped at this opportunity because I enjoy interacting with seniors and hearing their fascinating stories," Gottschalk said. Avery added, "I love seeing the amazing things seniors create and the joy they have while making art."

This time, Miramonte juniors Nora and Lily Kalmar along with the veteran Maharbiz led seniors through an art lesson to paint flowers. Overseen by a staff member, the teens filed into the crafts room, where they met a variety of residents and squeezed tubes of colorful paint into plastic palettes.

From the steel oven, the aroma of freshly baked cookies wafted into the room, accompanied by soft jazz music from nearby speakers. The high schoolers sat beside a resident before guiding their brushes into paint.

Volunteering at a senior living community comes with its challenges, including seniors' uncertainty about participating, let alone making the first bold strokes on a blank canvas. "The residents are unique in how they paint, and their confidence can affect this a lot," Maharbiz said. "Some will be perfectly fine doodling while others will ask for more help."

But as time passed, residents' movements became fluid and confident, accompanied by the occasional helping hand of the Kalmars or Maharbiz. Seniors began chatting amongst themselves, complimenting each other on their use of color and revealing their vibrant personalities. One resident took inspiration from a nearby jazz poster, incorporating the bright yellows and oranges into her flower.

Many canvases sat finished on the table, each holding a unique flare: swirls of orange for the petals, bright stems of green, patterns of pink that snaked around the buds. One resident still worked tirelessly at her piece.

As the Kalmars and Maharbiz waved goodbye, what lingered was the intergenerational connection forged between the youth and seniors. "I liked watching residents create their pieces, and I especially enjoyed helping them make something they're proud of," Nora said. Maharbiz also considered the linkage formed over age barriers. "These residents all have their own stories they may lead on," Maharbiz said. "The woman I talked to was really interesting. It was cool to learn that she spoke Spanish. I tried to speak a little Spanish to her, even though mine isn't that good."

Ultimately, each experience reflected an eye-opening journey for all involved. "It's a joy for these kids to visit these seniors and be able to help and inspire them through art," Horoupian said. "This isn't necessarily a place where you have a goal - it's a place where you see another part of the world, see how seniors live their lives. I wanted to give something to the community, and I wanted to be good to another human - to give my heart through art, through kindness. When you give, you already gain so much."

Those interested in volunteering at Aegis Living Moraga may contact Hui Lin Chin, Life Enrichment Director, at HuiLin.Chin@aegisliving.com. Students interested in Laratelier art classes may email Lara Horoupian at Larig23@yahoo.com.

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