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Dominique Boutaud has opened the HealingInColor art studio in Nashua to help patients with dementia and their caregivers. (GRETCHEN GROSKY/Union Leader)

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How one artist in Nashua is trying to help those with dementia

By GRETCHEN M. GROSKY

New Hampshire Union Leader

NASHUA — Dominique Boutaud is an award-winning French artist who's exhibited her work around the world and recently trained in a new medium — working with dementia patients.

"People with dementia need to be loved. They need to be respected, and they need to be accepted for who they are," Boutaud said. "When we use creativity, we use stress less."

Boutaud recently opened a studio on the second-floor of a building on Nashua's Main Street called Healing in Color. It's lit with sun, and works of art in bold colors by various local artists adorn the walls. In one corner are sketches from her father, in another it's the work she does with artists with dementia. Masks, fingerprint art and floral drawings are among the masterpieces she helps them with.

She said it's not just her clients who find solace. Their caregivers find respite as well, whether it is by giving them some alone-time as the person works with Boutaud or through lessons done together.

"Caregivers are very stressed because they have a lot of responsibility and not much time for them," she said. "They are shocked by the change in their life. They need help."

Boutaud spent a year to become a certified dementia facilitator through the national program Opening Minds Through Art. OMA is an intergenerational visual art program for people with dementia developed by the Scripps Gerontology Center at Miami University in Ohio. She also volunteers teaching art classes to those with Alzheimer's and dementia at the Day Away program at Nashua's St. Joseph's Hospital.

“For my elderly people, my goal is to give them the possibility to create without fear or being judged, having freedom and peace which can lead them to well-being, being proud of themselves, happiness and improving their communication and connection with others,” she said.

Boutaud held an open house to show off her works and the works of other artists as well as talk to people about her work with people living with dementia. One of those in attendance was Nichole Von Dette, program coordinator for the Alzheimer’s Association in Bedford.

“Any way you can help engage people in ways they were in the past or to be successful at now is so beneficial,” Von Dette said. “That’s our goal — to find a way we can engage people and keep them engaged as long as they live.”

Boutaud does classes in her studio, but also at nursing homes, health care facilities, senior centers and private homes. She is also working toward developing art programs for children of incarcerated parents and for veterans.

“When I paint my hope is to give hope to people ... and a window of happiness,” she said. “There are a lot of things to be happy about.”

Silver Linings is a continuing Union Leader/Sunday news report focusing on the issues of New Hampshire’s aging population and seeking out solutions. Union Leader reporter Gretchen Grosky would like to hear from readers about issues related to aging. She can be reached at ggrosky@unionleader.com or (603) 206-7739. See more at www.unionleader.com/aging.