



## How patients brush up on skills

“Art is what you can see when you can’t see”. One of Stephen Dernocoure’s art students said this to him – and he’s never forgotten it. Partly because this student had experienced a life of considerable psycho-social disruption on top of having Huntington’s Disease, a progressive brain disorder that causes uncontrolled movements, emotional problems, and loss of cognition.

Although Huntington’s Disease had taken away most of her motor skills, she could still create art. It’s this outpouring of emotional expression that Stephen believes helps art students affirm their self-acuity, despite what the disease is doing to their bodies.

An experienced art therapist, Stephen works with Huntington’s Disease patients and residents at St Joseph’s Hospital once a week, guiding them through brush strokes and paint rolling to create painting, drawings, fabric prints, and even silent film. Although Stephen mainly helps his students create visual art, sometimes it’s not something the student wants to do, or is able to do. He helps them express themselves creatively in whatever

way they’re able to – including poetry and verbal expression.

Having worked with patients with Huntington’s for over 15 years as well as palliative care patients, Stephen says his challenge lies in helping his students work with tools such as brushes and paint rollers – making brush handles thicker so his students can grip them, or adding handles to printing frames so they can hold them.

Stephen sees his classes as a way of guiding the patients; teaching them technique and colour selection in a staged step-by-step function, according to the needs and abilities of the patients, but ultimately being led by their creative expression and what they want to create.

“This art program assists the residents to give legitimate form and language to their thoughts and feelings in a supportive and nurturing environment” Stephen said. Last year, Stephen exhibited his students’ art at St Vincent’s Hospital, giving them a showcase for their work, and hopes to repeat the exhibition again in 2017.

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STEPHEN DERNOCOURS