

Drawing their own conclusions

United Way agency helps the intellectually disabled earn a living with their works of art

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Quyen Ngo smiles broadly as he sits at the end of the table admiring his latest creation.

"I'm waiting for it to dry," he said of the vibrantly coloured painting he'd completed moments before.

"I like to paint flowers, trees and animals," he continued pointing proudly to the table-top-sized board with an avant-garde daisy blooming at the centre.

Ngo has painted and sold scores of works since he joined the art program at Community Living Toronto's Etobicoke Employment Training Services centre. He's among dozens of adults with varying degrees of intellectual disability who come to the art studio every Thursday to unleash their creative juices.

Though some of the artists may have trouble communicating, their art speaks volumes about how they feel and who they are.

Flowers are Patricia Habuda's passion and they appear in all of her art. "They make me happy," she said brushing bright pink acrylic paint on the petals of a work in progress.

She's saving the money earned from selling her art to buy a Shih Tzu puppy.

"I love to paint and will keep working until maybe one day I can teach someone else to paint just like Harold taught me."

That's Harold Tomlinson, a support worker and jack-of-all-trades at the Etobicoke centre.

He started the art program with a handful of people back in the early '90s.

"We make learning fun, non-judgmental, open and free. ... It's all about expression and exploration," he said, adding art gives people – even

those who are non-verbal – an outlet for expression without labelling them as disabled. "The only label they have is that of artists."

And that's empowering.

Tomlinson, who's been working with Community Living Toronto for some 20 years "watching people grow," said life for those with an intellectual disability has changed dramatically – from the days when they were institutionalized to today when many are living on their own and even having families.

Established in 1948, Community Living Toronto, offers support services to about 6,000 people each year in more than 70 locations in the city. It helps them reach their potential while living more independently in the community.

The agency provides a range of programs – from contract work to academic programs including computer training and literacy, said Sheila Magee, program manager for day supports in Etobicoke.

"I never cease to be impressed by their abilities," Magee said of program participants with intellectual disabilities.

Community Living Toronto is a founding member of the United Way of Greater Toronto and one of its 200 health and social service agencies. United Way funds pay for the agency's camp at Shadow Lake in York Region, and a number of staff, services and activities.

United Way ensures that creative souls like Neil Clifford, whose imaginative works are painted from a bird's-eye view, have the opportunity to spread their wings.

"It's all in my head. I'm painting what I see in my head," said Clifford.

And what a happy place it is.