

# Art gallery promotes healing

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WINNIPEG, MB—When Nigel Bart was diagnosed with schizophrenia, he found the health care system did not cater to the individual needs of people suffering from mental illness.

It wasn't until Bart began to work in his mother's pottery studio that he finally found something that had a positive effect on his life and illness.

"It was therapeutic; it made me feel stronger and it set me on my road to recovery," he says. It also inspired him to found Artbeat Studio, a studio and gallery space for people dealing with mental health issues.

People with obsessive compulsive disorder, depression, bipolar disorder and schizophrenia among other mental illnesses apply to enter a six month program where they create art every day. There are nine spots available.

"We have never had a shortage of artists coming to our door, or people who want to be artists... we always fill the quota," says Bart who opened the studio in 2004.

When considering applications, Artbeat gives priority to those who really need the program, not to those who are the best artists or who are functioning best in society, he adds.

Since Artbeat Studio's inception, nearly 90 people with varying mental illnesses have gone through the program.



A performance at the Artbeat Studio in Winnipeg.

The artists set goals for themselves that pertain to their lives and their artwork and engage in critical discussions about their creations.

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By the end of the program participants have created a number of pieces and display them in a large exhibition at the gallery. Their work, including paintings, sculptures, ceramics, stained glass, wood carv-

ings and weavings, can be used as portfolio pieces if the artist is considering a career, or to apply for grants.

"The artists come into the program primarily as consumers of mental health services," says Bart. "By the time they're through with the program, they are thinking of themselves more as artists... A lot of the artists come in on welfare or disability, but a lot of them are able to sustain themselves based on their artwork," he says.

Though the program has undoubtedly helped many, Bart says he considers it one part of a multi-faceted recovery program that must include medication, counselling and peer groups, among other things.

Artbeat Studio is funded by Manitoba Arts Council and by donations.