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**PROGRAM PAINTS UPLIFTING PICTURE OF MENTAL ILLNESS**

By Melissa Martin

July 23, 2009

Down on the street, the Fringe Festival crowds were buzzing. But up on the fourth floor of a smartly renovated Exchange District building, another party was in full swing.

On Thurs., July 16, Artbeat Studio — an innovative artistic haven dedicated to helping artists struggling with mental illness — was celebrating its ninth biannual exhibition.

"We always have great turnouts," beamed board member Ernie Bart, as he navigated the throngs of well-wishers sipping non-alcoholic punch and commenting on bold charcoal nudes.

Probably because they've made a lot of friends. Since Ernie's son Nigel Bart founded the program in 2005, Artbeat has produced 60 alumni. They prefer to keep things small, and only nine artists are accepted at a time; most, says executive director Lucille Bart, are referred to the studio from mental health workers.

"The arts are an inviting door to be able to address difficult issues in that way," Lucille said, sitting in the 3,600-sq. ft. studio's quiet pottery display room. "It's great for breaking down barriers. When people come here, they come for the art and to meet the artists. The disability takes a back seat."

For artists, that can be a rare reprieve. Stigma of mental illness persists, despite stats that show that more than 200 million prescriptions for anti-depressants are issued annually in North America and an estimated one in four Manitobans has sought medical advice for their mental health.

"Artbeat has given me more confidence," said painter Kathleen Crosby, 44, who displayed 26 boldly colourful paintings of stylized landscapes and geometric designs at the gala. "It's comforting to know that you're with other people who have the same sort of problems."

For Crosby, the show was a graduation of sorts. The Fort Garry resident was accepted to Artbeat late last year, after spending time in a crisis stabilization unit.

"I'm just free to be myself here. It's very comfortable, all the people are open and accepting," she says.

The studio's warm atmosphere keeps artists coming back. Alumni have established a satellite studio at 444 Kennedy St.; they are also developing new programs. Chef and sculptor John Bennigan completed his Artbeat residency late last year, but he's stayed on board to help develop a culinary art therapy program. His first offering: the Bipolar Soup cook-book, which focuses on wholesome "brain food" recipes.

"Artists have horrible diets, especially if they're sick," said Bennigan, a Little Italy resident who spent 20 years cooking in restaurants in Europe and the United States. "And a big problem with mental illness is seclusion. If we can allow food to bring people together... now everyone is smiling, and talking. And what many experience is that they can do more work as a result."

That's music to Lucille Bart's ears. "Mental health has been the orphan child of the health care system," she sighed. "There are so many tragic stories of people who don't survive. But we've always had a holistic view of recovery. If you're doing meaningful constructive work, and have a community around you, that's all really helping people in a positive way."

Iridescence, Artbeat's 9th biannual exhibition, runs until July 25. For more information, check out Artbeatstudio.ca.



Melissa Martin

Artist Kathleen Crosby with some of her pieces at Artbeat Studio's 9th biannual exhibition.

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[Back](#)  
[Top of Page](#)

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