

The Senior

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Celebrate the Second Half of Life

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Learning Painting After 50

Story and photos by Burton Laine

Mary Beth Downs is a self-described late bloomer. At mid life she started painting, and of the 30 students she now teaches every week, 27 are over 50 years of age. “My oldest student is 92 and has been here about ten years,” says Downs.

She doesn’t feel there is much difference between younger learners and older learners. “We talk a little louder for hearing problems, but I don’t see a difference between age groups because we start at such a basic level. This isn’t a place where

we all do the same picture. They are doing their own work. At this stage of life they have the luxury of time for exploring and growing,” explains Downs.

There is constant banter in the studio during a class.

“I went to a Dali exhibition, and was surprised he didn’t finish edges. It was really distracting to see the edges peeking out from the framing.”

“Dali didn’t finish his edges?”

“Go figure, and he made all that money.”

“This is a place to free your spirit and it’s a journey, not a destination,” says Downs. “It’s an experience going through it and you can experience it at any stage of life. My older students are finding the infancy of art. So there is a new life and excitement. They tell me this is the fastest two hours of the week.” She described one student whose family was very worried when he retired because his life was his work. They didn’t know what he would do, but painting filled the void.



Mary Beth Downs (left) discusses oil painting with Sue Brown.

(Pictured right) Sue Brown's small canvas oil project. Sue has been in Mary Beth's classes for two years.

(Pictured left) Lisa Hutchinson (left) goes through an art supplies catalog with Mary Beth. Lisa is a nine year student in her classes.



Downs started painting in oils 33 years ago, learning from two artists in a home studio. In high school she felt that art was for “talented kids,” so there was a barrier to be broken. From there she took a watercolor class from Mr. Chee at UMD. She got into the second year course by mistake, but he let her continue and after struggling through, took five quarters of classes from him. “Then I took a drawing class, which led to more classes, and after ten years they said I had to leave because I had enough credits to graduate,” she says. Outgrowing her home studio, she looked for another location and ended up in the basement of St. Michael’s School. “They told me that because it was a school building I had to do some teaching. I knew my stuff, but didn’t know if I could teach. It was 13 years ago in January when I started with two students and myself. What I’ve found out is I can do this, I’m good

at it, and people are growing and you can see it in their work. Now I help others break those barriers.” One of those first two students still comes to her class.

Downs feels that during class there’s a humming sound in the room that she feels is wonderful.

“I do like the darkness and the lightness.”

“But you have to blend this.”

“The masters put the paint on really thick and you’re doing it really thin.”

“I’m on a fixed income. Do I have enough blue?”

“Yes, you do. Now start blending in the white.”

Downs feels “they learn to see things differently with a greater depth than they would just glazing through it. Art heightens your awareness around you. It might tweak things for an older person who didn’t notice some things before. Instead of seeing a tree

they see the values and shades and depths and leaves and branches within the tree. They are seeing and not just looking. From my oldest students to the younger ones, I see their excitement.” Research has shown that older persons engaged in activities where they achieve mastery and control have better health than those that don’t. This sense of mastery leads to feelings of empowerment where people have more confidence and energy to try new things.¹ Several of her students have gone on to get art degrees. One person came to the studio only able to draw stick figures, and she eventually started doing ceramics and was invited to do a show in China.

Shelly Norden did fiber arts, and she wanted to learn more about color. “I’m learning a ton about color that I’m able to translate into my weaving. When I started, Mary

1 Gene D. Cohen, *The Mature Mind – The Positive Power of the Aging Brain* (New York, Basic Books, 2005). 176-177.

Beth had us do exercises to open up the right side, the creative side, of our brains. I enjoy my time here.”

There have been studies about the effects of community-based arts programs on the health and functioning of older adults. One study of arts groups of people with an average age of 80 showed that participation had stabilized or improved their health.¹ Downs

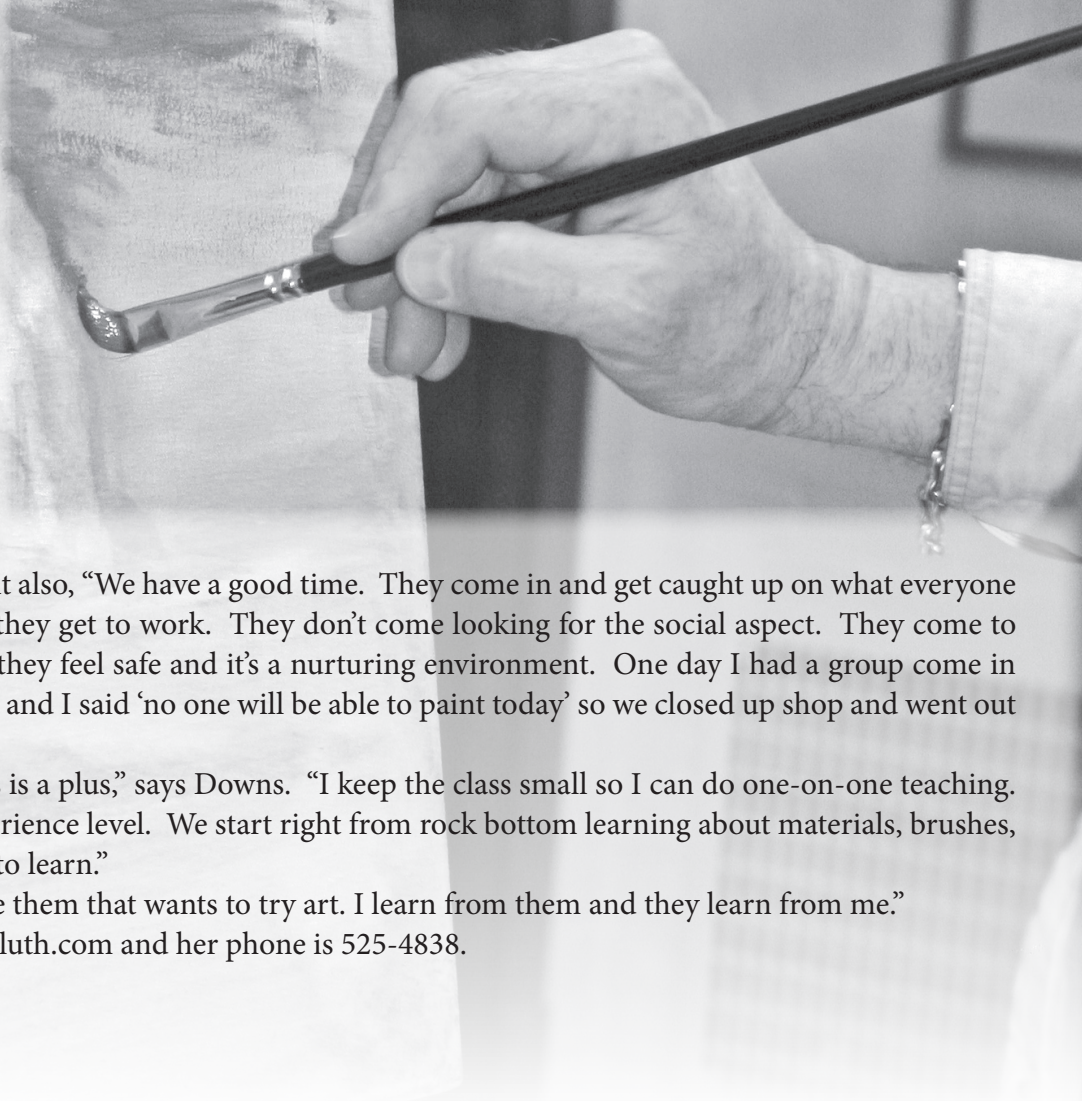
feels the social part of it is important also, “We have a good time. They come in and get caught up on what everyone has been doing all week, and then they get to work. They don’t come looking for the social aspect. They come to learn art. It’s comfortable because they feel safe and it’s a nurturing environment. One day I had a group come in and everyone was having a bad day, and I said ‘no one will be able to paint today’ so we closed up shop and went out for coffee and visited.”

“Feeling good about themselves is a plus,” says Downs. “I keep the class small so I can do one-on-one teaching. I take everybody, regardless of experience level. We start right from rock bottom learning about materials, brushes, and paints. It’s a safe environment to learn.”

“Everyone has something inside them that wants to try art. I learn from them and they learn from me.”

Her website is: www.artcellarduluth.com and her phone is 525-4838.

1 Ibid. 179.



Bill Wise works on a scenic oil painting (above).

Mary Beth demonstrates a technique to add clouds to the painting while Bill looks on (lower photo). Bill is one of Mary Beth’s newer students.