



RACHEL KALPANA JAMES



[Rachel Kalpana James](#) graduated with a Bachelor of Commerce from Carleton University (1984). She took art courses at the High School of Commerce in Ottawa before studying Advertising and Design part-time at the Ontario College of Art in Toronto. After graduating in 1993, she finally realized she was not cut out for the values of business and advertising even though it introduced her to a conceptual approach to art. She then began creating art and exhibiting in Canada including The [Art Gallery of Ontario](#), and The [Royal Ontario Museum](#), and internationally in the USA, UK, Netherlands, India and Pakistan.

PROJECT DESCRIPTION

Rachel Kalpana James offers senior residents of the Élisabeth Bruyère Residence a chance to tell their story through a visual journal. Rachel teaches participants how to create a book by combining the techniques of mixed media, image transfers, snap-shots, letter-writing, postcards and drawing. The process consists of collecting and creating of a series of mementos and images and assembling them into a book form that will reflect the participant's own personal voyage. This project is an ideal platform for Rachel to work with seniors who do not always have the ability to attend classes offsite. Her project is a unique creative exercise that helps them discover their own visual style and identify issues or interests important to them.

PARTNER SITE

[Élisabeth Bruyère Residence](#) is a bilingual, 71-bed long-term care home located in the historic Byward Market area of downtown Ottawa. It is connected to Élisabeth Bruyère Hospital. Élisabeth Bruyère Residence helps its residents reach their physical, social, psychological and spiritual potential by providing personal, nursing, and supportive services. Patients with dementia receive specialized services.

ABOUT ART PLACE

Art Place is a community outreach program of AOE Arts Council, funded in part by the Ontario Trillium Foundation. In its inaugural year, the new social practice professional artist-in-residence program will enable six jury selected artists and groups of artists the opportunity to offer unique free-of-charge artistic services in collaboration with community sites across the city of Ottawa. Each artist or arts group will be paired with a non-profit organization for a period of 5 to 8 weeks. The artists will work with a designated site partner and its participants to create an artistic project. Art Place will bring together different participants to work collaboratively and generate awareness for socially-driven issues.

ART PLACE INTERVIEW WITH RACHEL KALPANA JAMES

March 9, 2015

For her Art Place project, book artist Rachel Kalpana James worked with residents of the Élisabeth Bruyère Residence who suffer from different cognitive and physical disabilities. Rachel helped the participants tell their story through a visual journal, reflecting their own personal voyage. By combining different techniques of mixed media, she taught them how to create a book of collected memories and a series of mementos. Her project offered a unique creative exercise to help participants discover their own visual style and identify issues or interests that are close to the heart.

Rachel told us about her experience working with the Élisabeth-Bruyère residents.

You led your Art Place project at the Élisabeth Bruyère Residence. Can you tell us about the participants you worked with?

I worked with six residents at the Élisabeth Bruyère Residence. Some used wheelchairs and others suffered from dementia in different degrees, which means they may not have remembered our sessions from week to week, or understood fully what we were doing. During the sessions, they seemed present, and they engaged with interest when asked to try the activities. All participants had pleasant, positive dispositions and knew what they liked or didn't like.

One of the participants, is of Irish and New Zealand ancestry, has a great sense of humour and recounts stories of her family. She is bilingual and worked for the National Film Board.



Another participant is a First Nations person; she is artistic and studied with the artist Surt Beady. She has a keen sense of colour and a mischievous personality, which she applies to her collage and paintings. She chats freely about her interests and family.

A middle-aged resident, originally from Ethiopia, has shown some unexpected cognition through the collage exercises. He is helpful to others and responds to questions with feeling, especially when asked about his daughter.

A female participant has lived a life of varied work, which draws on her sense of social responsibility and musical talent. She initiates conversations, compliments and teases me about the art activities.

We have a francophone participant who has shared her story in English. It was noted that in the telling, she blossomed, and many were hearing from her for the first time. She has written a book on palmistry and is accomplished in many forms of art.

The last participant has the gift of gab, which I first experienced on meeting her at the press Art Place Launch Event. I encouraged her to join the sessions though she insisted she was not artistic. Open and easy going, she draws on her experiences of coming from a military family and living in many locations in Canada.

Can you describe the project?

We started with collage, where I encouraged the group to choose images of objects, colours, and letters to complete word portraits of their names. We explored identity through historical and cultural meanings of their first names. Next we linked identity with personal stories. I videotaped each resident as they shared a personal moment or a reflection. They referred to personal photos and mementos that I had requested they bring to class. I transposed the audio into text. They provided feedback and I edited their texts accordingly and completed book layouts.

Next, we talked about the meanings of various colours such as red (passion, fire, anger), yellow (joy, explosions, warmth), blue (tranquility, sea/sky, sombre), green (nature, calm, money). Each resident chose their own acrylic colours to paint abstract markings, expressive washes or figurative representations to accompany their stories. They all chose a book cover from an array of flowered, textured, striped, checkered and plain fabrics. Their photos, paintings and quotes were then incorporated with their story-text to assemble a visual journal. The results were personal books that allowed them to explore the imaginative expression of self.

Was this your first time working with participants living with cognitive and physical disabilities? If so, were there any challenges?



Each resident had differing degrees of ability and understanding, which proved to be a challenge in matching exercises with levels of capability. Attention was required to communicate clearly and interpret the meaning of their responses. For example, the staff told me that one resident might say “no” but really meant “yes” and vice versa. Therefore, more time was required in each session to complete planned activities thoughtfully. Since we had limited time during the sessions, I assigned “homework” to collect personal materials for the books, and solicit feedback from residents, which allowed me to edit the stories offsite. The Élisabeth Bruyère staff (Joanne and Kim) were most helpful in facilitating these activities. They also attended every class and were a necessary support in communication and assisting the residents.

You are teaching them about book arts, but what have you learned from the participants?

It gave me insight into their lived lives and the challenges they face now. As well, I appreciated their openness to the project, their willingness and trust, their skill and learning. They each brought a sense of self and commitment and competence to the project. And though, I feel we just scratched the surface of what we could have produced because of our limited time, I do believe through our process of sharing stories and visual expression, we honoured together their individual stories at a deeper level.

FUNDED IN PART BY | FINANCÉ EN PARTIE PAR



An agency of the Government of Ontario.
Un organisme du gouvernement de l'Ontario.