

# SENIOR PORTRAITS





Previous page: Nicole Gavrilovici, grade eight. Above: Alannah Greene, grade eight.

#### Amy Albert Bloom

Artists often create work in response to current experiences in their lives. Art students often do the same. Art teachers, too, may create lessons inspired by their present situations. America's elder population is lately on my mind as I have aged, as have my parents. Even when I'm not with them, I think about the elderly, particularly those who need help, especially as I walk past a local nursing home.

#### Finding the Right Approach

I wondered what my students' view of older people was. I thought about introducing the topic of elderly citizens as an art theme, but I felt unsure of how to approach this with my eighth-grade students. In my second

year of teaching this age group, I wondered how they would respond. I also wanted to avoid stereotyping the aged, who, like members of other age cohorts, vary greatly in their individuality and are certainly not all frail.

Ready to shy away from the topic, I happened to see a notice the very day I was vacillating. It was September 21, which I discovered is World Alzheimer's Day, promoted by Alzheimer's Disease International to "raise awareness and challenge the stigma that surrounds dementia." (The Alzheimer's Association [alz.org] hosts "The Longest Day" each summer solstice, June 21, to raise research funds.) This notice encouraged me and became a way to introduce the project challenge.

#### Senior Portraits

My students had recently completed self-portraits in pencil, so I decided to focus on portraits. I placed boxes of pastels on the tables as well as a selection of 9 x 12" (23 x 30 cm) construction paper in the neutral and grayed hues we used for students' self-portraits. I began class with a brief dis-

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cussion around the question, "What do you know about Alzheimer's disease?" Many students were already familiar with the term, as they have (or had) relatives with the disease. I mentioned the importance of the date, and we discussed why a day to raise awareness for a disease could be useful.

I told students they would be drawing portraits of older people. I instructed them to do an online search of the term "people in nursing homes." I used this search phrase because it provided a useful variety of images: elderly people who were obviously frail, in need of or receiving care, as well as healthier older people engaged in social activities. Students chose from images ranging from women enjoying coffee together, to elders with caregivers nearby.

Students were a bit apprehensive about beginning, but found the pastels I provided enjoyable to work with. The pastels allowed them to draw with some freedom, as the thick fuzzy lines can imply more character and dimension with more ease than struggling with a fine pencil line. I found many of the resulting portraits impressive and thoughtfully rendered.

#### Junk Mail

The next day, I showed students a short film a friend had previously shared with me, *Junk Mail*, produced by the film production company Voyager. The film shows Mary, who at age 98, lives alone and travels by special bus each day to the local senior center


where she has meals, takes part in activities, and enjoys companionship.

The film title refers to an activity that Mary does when alone at home to pass the time: She tears junk mail into tiny pieces. Students watched the film with interest, and with some concern. "Can't she stay there [at the center] overnight?" a student asked, sounding a bit distressed that Mary would be home alone.

### Reflections

After a post-viewing discussion, students filled out a sheet with questions about their drawing experience, the film, and aging. The most interesting responses came from these two questions: What did you think about the movie? Can you imagine yourself at 98? "I feel like people would start to forget about me." "If I am alive, I would like to live under a mass of crocheted or knitted clothing." "I thought it was a really sad movie. I wish I could help them and comfort them, too." "I can imagine myself in a nursing home and having fun."

### Reflections

Through the portraits, their comments, and their written responses, students showed concern for those elderly who may need care and friendship. They shared stories about parents who work caring for the elderly, their own volunteer work at nursing homes, their older relatives, and their own concerns about what life will be like when they are old themselves. I'm looking forward to displaying the works they've created and continuing this conversation with students about caring for America's elder population. 

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### NATIONAL STANDARD

*Connecting: Relate artistic ideas and work with societal, cultural, and historical context to deepen understanding.*

### WEB LINK

[vimeo.com/142997373](https://vimeo.com/142997373)



Nora Kern,  
grade eight.



Lydia Albright,  
grade eight.