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## PAINTING A SENSE OF

By [Joel Rozen](#)

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Since he learned he had Parkinson's disease eight years ago, Sarasota resident Charles Jursa has had to let go of many of his favorite pastimes.

The degenerative neurological disorder that started with a tremor in his hand has made playing golf difficult, and he can no longer drive.

Worse is what the symptoms have done to his ability to communicate: at 85, Jursa sometimes finds his speech so badly slurred that even doctors in his hometown of Chicago have had trouble understanding him.

Recently, though, he has found a new mode of self-expression.

For the past two years, the former Realtor and World War II veteran has participated in a new kind of painting class at HealthSouth Rehabilitation Hospital of Sarasota. "Touch Drawing for Parkinsonians and Their Caregivers" introduces those afflicted with the disorder to their creative side. Jursa, like other participants, says the program helps him cope.

A form of expressive arts therapy introduced in the 1970s, touch drawing is a painting technique that enables the physically impaired to paint without too much physical exertion. It does not require the same focus or control as other, more traditional painting methods. Those with Parkinson's, however, say that it has helped them regain their old focus. And their caretakers say touch painting has helped with self-esteem as well.

This is progress for guys like Jursa, who after diagnosis experience anxiety and insecurity.



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Charles Jursa of Sarasota, who suffers from Parkinson's, says touch drawing, a form of expressive arts therapy, makes him feel good. "I have hope that maybe this will help me," he says. "I never knew what hope was, in a way."

While Jursa's sense of fine art was once limited to the Sistine Chapel and whatever Chicago Art Museum ads he saw downtown, he has since developed a strong affinity for water-soluble oils. Now, his abstract work is on display at a gallery in Towles Court.

For the estimated 5,000 residents of Sarasota and Manatee counties afflicted with Parkinson's, every day is a battle of body over brain. The disease is marked by constant, uncontrolled movements, showing up as a stiffness or trembling in one part of the body and eventually spreading; to allay their frustration, many people with Parkinson's have found solace in support groups or therapy. Two years ago, Sarasota artist Victoria Domenichello-Anderson brought touch drawing to the table.

A co-founder of Ringling College's Art and Healing Program and current partner at the Expressive Arts Florida gallery in Towles Court, Domenichello-Anderson had spent years working with cancer patients and victims of child abuse when she shifted her attention to people with Parkinson's.

"The really important thing about touch drawing is that it's easy to do. You don't require any tools; you don't need to hold or manipulate a brush."

Instead, touch drawing enables painters to work with their fingers, meditatively. The practitioner rolls a few dabs of water-based paint across a rectangular piece of Plexiglas, then covers it with a piece of tissue paper. From there, artists proceed to trace shapes and designs across the surface of the tissue paper. The method makes no mess.

"People really like it," says Domenichello-Anderson. "They feel it's non-threatening. It's soothing. It's also a way for people to release whatever they're feeling at the time."

In 2006 and 2007, Domenichello-Anderson teamed with Ringling College to host two five-week touch drawing sessions for people with Parkinson's.

The classes were successful enough that last summer, the Manasota Parkinson's Support Group's Hermine Bachrach fund underwrote another series of weekly classes.

Parkinson's specialists say they are not surprised that touch drawing has been such a hit with their clients.

"They can actually use those skills to retrain circuits in the brain," said Dean Sutherland, director of the neurology program at Florida State University and founder of Sarasota's four-year-old Parkinson's Clinic. According to Dr. Sutherland, the intense concentration involved in artistic activity may be useful for those with the disease, especially when it comes to recovering lost skills, like thinking clearly.

"If people are able to express themselves in a creative way, or have the

opportunity to show on a canvas what they've been doing, it's empowering," he says. "They feel some value to themselves they didn't realize they had."

A week ago, Domenichello-Anderson started her third series of weekly afternoon classes. Jursa, whose work has lined her gallery walls for the last three months, was among the first to register.

When he describes his art, Jursa's eyes grow wide and he shakes more than usual. Drawing, he says, has helped him with his mood. He spends a lot of time contemplating the creative process.

"I don't look at myself as a successful artist," he says. "Just doing it makes me feel good."

His approach tends to be slow and methodical -- pushing the lines in colorful, geometric directions, organizing his thoughts. In the afternoon, when he starts to feel worn down, the task gives him "something to think about that's clear and definite."

Most of his oeuvre at the Expressive Arts Florida gallery is symbolic representations of autobiographical events. The imposing "Wall of Boulders" piece, for instance, was about "overcoming obstacles" during his days as a World War II sergeant. "Cooperation," a monochromatic trio of green stick figures, officially represents his mental, spiritual and physical states. But the painting also evokes the day he learned how to make one of his favorite colors: until he started class, he says, he never knew green had blue and yellow in it.

Otherwise, his pieces are abstract, and take more time to title. He usually needs a few days before names like "Understanding" and "Patience" occur to him. "Contentment," of course, came instantly.

"I have hope that maybe this will help me," he says. "I never knew what hope was, in a way."

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