

Making Art One Night at a Time

By Carrina Stanton / For The Chronicle | Posted: Friday, April 29, 2016 7:36 pm



Centralia College Paint Night

Women work away at their easels painting the backgrounds of what will be a cherry blossom tree on Tuesday, April 19, at Centralia College's Paint Night.

Toward the end of the evening, Sue Wachter looked around the room at her students at Paint Night at Centralia College. Each one had created a painting of cherry blossoms cascading from a branch in front of an azure sky. Some were more pink. Others more red. Some blossoms were large and cartoonish, others small and delicate.

To Wachter, they were all beautiful.

"What I love is that people came alive and started believing in themselves as artists," Wachter said of what she loves about teaching the sessions. "That's what really does it for me."

Creating an authentic art experience is the goal of the Paint Night events being held at Centralia College this spring. Organizer Staci Jacobson, special events and media coordinator for Centralia College, said the first paint night was held in January but she hopes the events will continue for a long time. The idea was borne out of the desire to create experiences that would get community members to come to campus without requiring a commitment to a series of classes.

The sessions are inspired by a trend happening nationwide of art studios offering evening sessions where people of all artistic abilities can come in, enjoy some food and wine and leave with a finished piece of art. At first, Paint Night in Centralia was held once a month. But when the first couple sessions sold out before Jacobson could even hang posters, she decided twice a month would offer more people an opportunity to take part.

"A lot of people like it because it's a nice, fun thing to do on an evening," Jacobson said. "And

we tried to keep it affordable to keep people from going to Olympia, where there are places that offer similar events.”

Local ARTrails artists Joan Hitchcock and Sue Wachter teach the classes. Jacobson comes up with the themes for the classes: April sessions focused on cherry blossoms; May will be an underwater scene with a turtle; and June will be a beach path. Hitchcock and Wachter share the responsibilities of teaching, as well as coming up with a game plan for how to create a full sized canvas painting from start to finish in a matter of a couple hours.

Hitchcock said they wanted to give students an authentic art experience where they actually could learn a few artistic techniques. For example, she said, some facilities that offer paint provide attendees with canvases with the image pre-printed on it, so all they have to do is paint within the lines. At the Centralia College paint nights, students begin with a completely blank canvas and create every part of their art piece generally only with instruction and a small amount of guidance from the teachers. Both Wachter and Hitchcock had taught art classes before and said they enjoy it for the interaction with students.

“Every student is different,” Hitchcock said. “You have to learn to be able to change on the fly. If someone’s not getting something, you have to be able to find another way to teach them.”

Some of the techniques students learned in the cherry blossom class included: swiping white and blues across the canvas to create a sky; using straws to blow black ink across the canvas to create branches for the cherry blossoms; layering colors from lavender to almost white to make their cherry blossoms appear more three-dimensional; and creating a focal point. But more than anything, they learned they can create art. Wachter continually reminded students not to worry too much and just enjoy the experience with slogans of “perfect paintings are boring” and “relax and enjoy, you can’t mess this up.”

“I really lucked out with Joan and Sue,” Jacobson said of the instructing team. “They really want to make sure everybody has a great experience and goes home with someone they’re proud of.”

For Lee Hollis, who attended with her niece Leanna Wolf, the concept of creating the entire piece of art without a template was a bit outside her comfort zone.

“I’m a quilter and I do stained glass so I follow patterns,” Hollis said. “I thought we were going to follow a pattern so this for me is a challenge. But I love artwork and to be able to do it yourself and say ‘I did that’ is great.”

A challenge was just what fellow student Kristi Jewell was after with the class. She said she signed up for the painting session as a “growing experience” to celebrate her birthday. Jewell works in the TEEN program at Centralia College and said the experience would be one she’d likely draw on as an educator.

“This is awesome,” she said. “It’s nice to do something fun and relaxing outside of school and

it's good to remind me of what it feels like for our students when they're struggling with things."

And as a bonus, paint nights include appetizers and wine, noted students Brittany Myhre and Kimberly Salazar. The pair had previously attended one other paint night and were back to work on cherry blossoms. They said the classes are challenging, but they enjoy them.

"We thought 'maybe it'll be fun. But if it's crappy there's still wine,'" Salazar said.