

Conejo workshop offers participants experience as a low-vision artist

By Robyn Flans

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Creating art in the dark is a group at the Hillcrest Center for the Arts in Thousand Oaks, making clay sculptures Friday using the sense of touch, memory and imagination.

With most of the 20 participants donning sunglasses in the semi-darkened room at the Hillcrest Center for the Arts, Tish Brennan and Lynn Schwanauer, independent living skill instructors for the Braille Institute, conducted an experiment Friday morning designed to bring compassion and awareness to the seeing community.

"Our goal is to help people be more sensitive to blind people, but also to understand that inclusion to the arts is so important to them," Brennan said. "We don't create art just from our eyes, and what we see, we create it from our hearts and what we feel."

At Friday's event, each person was given clay, water and an assortment of tools. The assignment was to sculpt a pinch pot. Schwanauer gave them directions on how to flatten the first piece of clay for the base and then twist pieces into wormlike strips for the sides.

Brennan and Schwanauer with the Braille Institute, in conjunction with the Arts Council of the Conejo Valley and the Hillcrest Center for the Arts in Thousand Oaks, presented the workshop called "Sculpting in the Dark."

Ellen Wohl, 77, said feeling "blind" was a little frightening, but at the same time relaxing.

"Of course, this gave me a sense of empathy, but I felt that before when I had a retinal hemorrhaging where I didn't have vision," Wohl said. "When you haven't had sight, you can appreciate it more. I had my eyes closed the whole time, and it was liberating in a way."

Rick Tanaka, 34, was another participant.

"I found myself having visual memory, even though I kept my eyes closed," Tanaka said. "The experience did give me an appreciation for what it might be like not to have sight, particularly with the speed with which I followed through with my motions. I needed to take that extra few seconds to decipher what was at my disposal. I didn't even realize I had the fourth tool. It definitely slowed me down."

As a child, Elana Foxx, 56, was legally blind.

"When I became a single mother, I did a lot of diaper changing by feel and then I realized I needed to get it corrected in case of an earthquake," Foxx said. "This brought back a lot of memories today."

Joy Cook, 63, accompanied her husband, Jay, who has been blind for 12 years.

"It's an empathy experience for me," Cook said. "Sometimes I don't appreciate how he does what he does in total darkness. We're doing fine, but I would like people to know how visual impairment impacts people's lives. He doesn't allow it to limit his life, but it is limiting. This was interesting for me, not to be able to find things and knock over my water."

In the afternoon, participants had a verbal and tactile tour of the exhibit "Food 4 Thought," which includes work by low-vision artists. The exhibit runs through Oct. 10.

"That part is emphasizing the importance of accessibility to galleries and art shows and that people, even though they have low vision, can still appreciate art and what the artist has to communicate," Brennan said.

"One of the difficulties is that sometimes when nonsighted children are in school and want to take a visual arts class, sometimes they'll waive it and say, 'Well, you can't see, so we'll give you something else,'" Brennan said. "We want to break down those types of barriers and create public awareness of the importance of inclusion in everything, not just the arts."

"I've seen the work of people with no vision. They may not be able to see, but they have such great vision."

