

The healing power of art

By Suzy Blackburn, Director of Associates, Atlantic-Midwest Province



Val next to one of her displays.



Creating art is an integral part of Val's life.

“Art heals,” explains **Valerie Smitheman-Brown**. Those simple words have been a touchstone in the life and career of this Baltimore Associate.

As a clinical art therapist at the Kennedy Krieger Institute at Johns Hopkins Hospital, Val realizes that there is “something special about special needs kids.” Through them, Val heard God’s call to use her artistic gifts to help children and their parents experience God through art.

Responding to a need at the time, she began to offer nontraditional Confraternity of Christian Doctrine (CCD) classes to children with special needs. Students from six different parishes participated in Val’s classes. “Art,” she says, “is the most accessible way to access nonverbal feelings of faith for all of us.” Parents, who were required to be present for the classes, soon appreciated the opportunity to be a part of a community that accepted and valued them and their children.

Valerie has been uniquely well-prepared for her ministries. She earned an M.F.A. from Marshall University and has since gone on to complete an M.A.



in Art Therapy from George Washington University, an M.A. in Special Education from Johns Hopkins University, and, most recently, an M.A. in Theology from St. Mary’s University.

In retirement, Val became the sacristan at the Marikle Chapel of the Annunciation at Notre Dame of Maryland University. There she encountered the School Sisters of Notre Dame for the first time. Val immediately felt at home with the SSND focus on education for all, and was drawn to the Associate Relationship. “I was welcomed and accepted; my experience in art was valued and could be put to good use.

The SSND charism and my particular charism complement each other.” In every season, Val creates displays outside chapel that draw in the passer-by. Often there is something the viewer can touch and take: pebbles during Lent, or apples in autumn. “It’s really about creating a sense of sharing and community,” Val says.

Though retired, this mother of four and grandmother of three continues to create art and finds painting especially restorative. “We all need healing,” she says. “Art heals.” □