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With her Eye Response Interface Computer Aid not working, local artist and ALS sufferer Peggy Chun communicates by pointing her eyes to letters and numbers on a "spellboard" held by Holy Trinity School teacher Shelly Mecum while fellow volunteer Christine Amos writes down each letter Mecum calls out. Chun's bedroom walls are covered in art, photographs of family and friends, and inspirational quotations.

Island artist Peggy Chun, completely paralyzed by Lou Gehrig's Disease, is creating a mosaic of Blessed Damien through the help of students from Holy Trinity School

Story and photos by Anna Weaver | *Hawaii Catholic Herald*

On a bright Wednesday morning, a classroom at Holy Trinity School in Kuliouou is crowded with students sitting around tables and painting small, thick paper squares with watercolors. Written on the whiteboard are their instructions: "Wet on Wet. Base Color: Ultramarine blue. Drop-in color: Green-blue."

The students, sixth, seventh and eighth graders, talk about school activities, what they'll do after the half day of school gets out, and who has painted more squares so far.

But they also talk about the new friend they're painting those

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Statue of Jesus seen in snow outside Milwaukee church



CNS photo/Sam Lucero, Catholic Herald

A statue of Jesus outside Our Lady Queen of Peace Church in Milwaukee appears to be shivering in the snow Feb. 12. A recent stretch of below-zero temperatures and windchill factors reaching minus-20 degrees left Milwaukee area residents shivering as well.

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Blessed Marianne



squares for — well-known local artist Peggy Chun, who suffers from amyotrophic lateral sclerosis (ALS), or Lou Gehrig's Disease — and what all those little pieces will eventually become — a mosaic of Blessed Damien.

The experience has made the students philosophical and reflective.



Eighth grader Joshua Aiu is amazed by Chun's unwavering determination despite the fact that the disease has progressed to the point where she is completely paralyzed except for her eyes.

“The Bible says that the church is the body of the Christ and that in it we work together,” he said. “And so when one part can't go on, or has a hard time, it's dependent on the rest of the body to help.”

Seventh grader Cary Chang says it's an honor to help Chun, whom he adores. “Even though Peggy can't move at all, her heart moves around people,” he said. “Her love is all around touching people's hearts.”

Every week since the start of the school year, Joshua, Cary and other Holy Trinity students have been acting as Peggy's hands, water-coloring mosaic pieces according to the artist's instructions.

In working with the students, Chun, a former St. Francis School drama and literature teacher known for her whimsical paintings and vibrant island artwork, and now her valiant battle with ALS, is passing along not only artistic skills but her spirit to a new generation.

A new project

The way Chun communicates is with an Eye Response Interface Computer Aid (ERICA) that matches her eye movement with lasers. She looks at letters on the screen to spell out words,

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which the computer then “speaks.” However on a recent visit to her home, the computer wasn’t working because Chun’s eyes were too dry.

Instead, that day Chun used her eyes to point to different letters and numbers on a “spellboard” held by Holy Trinity teacher Shelly Mecum. Another volunteer wrote down each letter Mecum called out.

Chun has a large crew of dedicated volunteers playfully called “Peg’s Legs.”

With the late afternoon sunlight slanting through her bedroom window and onto her hospital-style bed, Chun “spoke” about how the collaboration with Holy Trinity School started.

She says she first thought of doing an artwork of Damien while working on a portrait of Mother Marianne Cope for St. Francis Medical Center in 2002. But her ALS soon became too advanced to undertake such a project.

The idea was revived when Mecum — the author of “God’s Photo Album,” a book created several years ago with students of Our Lady of Perpetual Help School in Ewa Beach — was asked to collaborate with Chun on a children’s picture book about Peggy’s life. After the book was finished this past year — and recently picked up by Mutual Publishing — Mecum began teaching at Holy Trinity.

Chun and Mecum realized that by using a mosaic technique and students as the painters, the long-desired Damien project could be accomplished. Each week Chun, who has the completed image in her mind, gives Mecum a new color “formula” the students will use that week. Chun provides the paintbrushes, paper and paints.

“I find that the fact that this painting is being created by a community is remarkable,” Chun said. She adds that she has loved mosaics since she saw them as a child in Europe. “I think a mosaic is a dignified, exquisitely beautiful way to present [Damien].”

Chun loves working with the students. “Their enthusiasm spills on to the little, tiny squares,” she said.

texts

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Parish &
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She sees each square as “a miniature abstract painting using [the students] newfound knowledge about color and its complements.”

However, for Chun, the most important thing about the project isn't the mosaic itself but the experience the students take from it, and imparting the same creative spirit she received from her own teachers.



“I keep thinking how knowing that they had a part in creating this painting, how this will stay with [the students] forever,” she said. “Just think how much fun these children are having learning without realizing where this will take them.”

‘Peggy Chun University’

To introduce the Holy Trinity students to Peggy Chun, Mecum showed them news segments and TV specials about her and explained ALS. Mecum says Chun captured their hearts immediately.

Mecum last quarter formed an enrichment class called “Painting for Peggy” for eighth graders to paint the mosaic squares. Soon sixth and seventh graders were involved. Then third graders began helping.

Eventually the entire student body, with eighth graders acting as mentors for the younger ones, will be involved in the mosaic in one way or another.

Mecum says the children see the project as a corporal work of mercy.

“They think it’s like feeding the hungry because Peggy, an artist, would be hungry for art,” she said. “So they’re little hands creating the work for her feeds her soul.”

Once the pieces are painted, artist Mark Turner will help Chun and the students arrange the squares according to Peggy’s

vision. The mosaic will be displayed at Turner's gallery and donated to a museum or perhaps the new Blessed Damien church on Molokai.

Chun's influence has extended beyond the painting project, leading teachers to joke that Holy Trinity has become Peggy Chun University.

Students have visited Chun at her home and heard her speak at the Hawaii Convention Center. A student-produced documentary on Chun is planned. The sixth grade for their science fair projects has been studying ALS and brain wave technology similar to a program developed by the Hawaii high-tech company Archinoetics. Chun has used the Archinoetics program to paint abstractly through probes placed on her head that measure brain waves.

Holy Trinity School principal, Sister of St. Joseph of Carondelet Rose Miriam Schillinger, says the collaboration with Chun ties into social justice teachings.

"I think it's a marvelous experience for the students," she said. "It is a good beginning for them to take notice of those who are handicapped, and you can see how much [Chun] is doing."

Painting in Heaven

Seventh grader Ali Calhoun said she is inspired by Chun because, despite being paralyzed, she will not quit painting. "Painting is her life," she said. "She will continue to paint until she passes away. And I'm pretty sure she will continue to paint when she's in heaven."

Mecum agrees. She said that when Chun lost the use of her hands, she painted with her mouth. When she couldn't use her mouth, she used the ERICA program and then the brain wave program to paint with her thoughts. Today she also paints with her nose. And now she's painting using students as her hands.

"Even if there's a rule against painting in heaven, Peggy will find a way around that rule with God," Mecum said. "Peggy will be asked to maybe paint the next rainbows we see or given a hand at the sky. How can you stop that artist from painting?"

What does Chun think of heaven? "Heaven is just this," she

said. "Our God-given talent of our creativity put to use at its fullest and our love of God, which gives us total peace of mind."

If you're interested in volunteering with Peg's Legs, please call 595-8434. Donations for art supplies for the mosaic project or Peggy's medical expenses may be sent to: Friends of Peggy Chun, 3115 Alika Avenue, Honolulu, Hawaii 96817.

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