



PHOTOS BY RILEY MORNINGSTAR | THE JOURNAL

Bonnie Lamarand, left, and Bonnie Stevens share a table together as the Painted Ladies meet for a socially distanced art session earlier this week.

Painted Ladies make South Cove home

BY RILEY MORNINGSTAR
THE JOURNAL

SENECA — Eight years ago, a small group of Oconee County women definitely didn't expect to be painting outside weekly for months because of a health pandemic.

That group would be the Painted Ladies, who first met at the Blue Ridge Arts Center (BRAC) and have been meeting weekly for years. When shutdowns were eased in South Carolina in April, the group committed to meeting at South Cove County Park for two to three hours every Tuesday to paint away.

"We decided we were missing each other after the

big shutdown and decided we needed to find a place," member Deb King said. "We have electricity, we have water, we have food, we have a bathroom. It's been perfect for us."

Masks are diligently worn and laughter is frequent. Friendly critiques are also given when asked for to improve the finer points of the artwork.

It would've been hard to imagine a more picture perfect fall day looking out on Lake Keowee when The Journal visited with the group just two days ago.

"This has been wonderful painting here, it's so peaceful," member Cathy Young said.



Art from the Painted Ladies group is displayed at South Cove County Park.

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"It just takes you away from everything. You don't think about anything else unless we're laughing."

"We treasure it," one member said. "We're like sisters."

The two Bonnies — Stevens and Lamarand — each shared how important it was for them to have the group continue to meet safely.

"We all worried we would get lazy because we're all at home," Stevens said. "When people make the effort to keep everything running, it really is important for everybody and good for your mental health."

What first started out as weekly painting sessions has turned into family vacations and celebrations together. Member Beti Strobeck said the friendships go "beyond art."

BRAC director Suzette Cross said she was grateful for the small group of women. "Besides meeting and painting and becoming wonderful friends, they are also volunteers at BRAC," she said. "They just really support us and that's why we're so thankful for them and these women. They just



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have so much fun together. They enter their artwork in just about all of our shows. We are very thankful for their presence at BRAC."

While the Painted Ladies group is maxed out with members, Stevens encouraged those interested in joining an art group to contact Cross at (864) 710-6593.

"One of the most valuable learning experiences here is that we help each other (critique work)," Stevens said. "We started with about three or four of us and then we grew. ... It starts

as an art group of people who like each other. It ends up with a group of people who like each other and love to paint."

With colder weather around the corner, the Painted Ladies said they're committed to meeting every Tuesday through the season. Although they said they'll plead with South Cove park officials to provide a fire pit, the ladies said they have no problem bundling up in warm clothes.

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