

Eddie McMenemy, 77.
 “When your feelings are
 in a mess, so is your art.”



KEN DOWNE

None of them could have predicted they'd find themselves here, in an art room next to a bowling green on the fringe of an Auckland park. Not the former truck driver, the barista, the weatherman, the lawyer, the funeral celebrant or the concert pianist.

They have almost nothing in common, apart from the stroke that changed their lives. Now they share two hours a week behind an easel at Māpura Studios, where they leave their differences at the door. Some arrive on wheelchairs and walkers; others can no longer speak. Art gives them all a new language.

For marriage and funeral celebrant Eddie McMenemy, 77, clot-busting drugs preserved much of his function after his February 2017 stroke. He can walk unaided and speak intelligibly, but the impact on his confidence and clarity was devastating to the former SAS soldier, singer and bass guitarist. He initially dismissed the idea of art therapy. “I said, ‘Don’t be daft, I can’t even draw a straight line.’”

He gave it a go anyway, and today he’s working on a yacht in a stormy sea, a painting commissioned by a friend. “I started on stick men and I couldn’t even get them right.” But the art sessions have boosted his confidence.

BRUSH STROKES

An Auckland art therapy programme is helping stroke victims speak a new language.



Top: Former barista Guy Seanyear, 55, is painting an Ōtorohanga landscape (left) from memory. “When I do the art, I can go anywhere in the world,” he says. **Above:** Detail from Eddie McMenemy’s painting.

“At first, I had to get my wife to stay with me because I was terrified – mixing with people I didn’t know and having to talk about how I felt. I was lost. Really lost. You are totally dependent on other people. And when your feelings are in a mess, so is your art. But then you explain what’s in your painting... that’s where the therapy is.”

The programme, called re-stART, is thought to be the first in the world targeting stroke survivors. An analysis of results from 2014 to 2016 by psychologist Simon Walker for his doctoral thesis found participants had a significant improvement in mood, anxiety and quality of life after the 12-week course.

Former barista Guy Seanyear, 55, is painting an Ōtorohanga landscape from memory. The colours calm him. “When I do the art, I can go anywhere in the world,” he says. Ex-truckie Craig Banton had a stroke when he was 45 and did the first re-stART course in 2010; his

abstract pieces have sold for up to \$1000 each. “I do abstracts because no one else here does them. And I can’t use brushes.”

Once high-profile weather-predicting “Moon Man” Ken Ring, 73, slowly traces characters in pencil with his left hand, having lost the use of his right. The body seems unwilling, but “my mind is totally clear”. The art keeps his frustration in check.

The programme is financially vulnerable, says director Diana McPherson, with Māpura having to raise \$10,000 to \$15,000 to run each course. This year’s course, which began in September, was confirmed only with support from the Hugo Charitable Trust.

Participants struggling to cope with a loss of identity after having to abandon high-flying careers find new ways to express themselves through their art, says therapist Alecia Steel.

“One said it was like being reborn. He had the chance to start over.” **DONNA CHISHOLM**

NATIONWIDE



Irish Fest organiser Gerry Paul.

GREEN DAYS

Irish-born and Hutt Valley-raised Kiwi Gerry Paul understands well the enduring international appeal of Irish culture. As a musician, he’s played with some big names in Irish music and performed at festivals all over the world. “The Irish tend to take the party with them wherever they go,” he says.

As the man behind the inaugural **NZ Irish Fest** (15-18 November, nzirishfest.co.nz), Paul this month brings the party to venues in Auckland, Wellington and Christchurch, with a programme of Irish music, comedy, film and more.

He says the festival was born as an idea for “a few gigs” but soon expanded. “Next thing you know you’re juggling 60 events.”

Headliners include contemporary Irish singer-songwriters Damien Dempsey, Mick Flannery and Lisa O’Neill, and comedians Alan McElroy and Darren Jardine, but plenty of local Irish acts and traditional music are also on the bill.

BEVAN RAPSON