

Outdoor art classes being held at the Alton Mill Arts Centre

By **Zachary Roman**

In our fast-paced world, carving out time for ourselves can be a challenge.

Artist CJ Shelton, who teaches art classes and has a gallery at the Alton Mill Arts Centre, wants to help people relax and have fun by drawing outside in the beauty of nature.

That's why this summer she is hosting 'en plein air' sketching classes outside of the Alton Mill.

Shelton, who's been at the Alton Mill for 11 years, teaches drawing classes every Wednesday and Sunday. For the summer, she's put the Sunday classes on hiatus to instead host her outdoor sessions. Normally, Shelton asks for a commitment of four or eight weeks for her drawing classes, as it's better for students in the long run. But her outdoor classes are one-offs and she said they're a perfect introduction to the world of art. All people need to bring to the classes is a sketchbook, pencils, and eraser.

Shelton said drawing outside is quite different than doing it inside, and that it's a way of exploring nature and seeing it in a different way.

'Even if you're not terribly confident with your drawing skills, by studying something, you learn a lot more about it, and you build your own skill,' said Shelton. No previous art experience is required for Shelton's classes, and she emphasized the fact that anyone can draw.

'Everybody is creative? it's just bringing it out. And drawing skills? I always tell my students drawing skills are teachable. There's certain principles and things that I can teach you and that's about 10 per cent of it? the rest of it is how well you observe, that's the mindfulness bit,' said Shelton. 'Getting yourself to slow down and be in the moment and study something and really look at it and not think 'oh yeah, I know what that looks like', but to actually really look at something, and then you see it in a different way.'

There's mental health benefits to art, said Shelton, and to being outside as well. She said the Alton Mill Arts Centre grounds are beautiful and a great place to de-stress.

She explained drawing keeps you in the moment and focused. Shelton said her students learn from her, but also from each other because everyone has their own unique style and way of looking at the world. She explained it's rewarding and exciting for everyone to see what each other has been working on at the end of a session.

'Drawing makes you slow down, and that's why it's a mindfulness practice? the better you observe, the better you are drawing. The skills come with practice; the observing also comes with practice. That's the hardest part to teach. But (I give) people the space and the opportunity to practice how to slow down and look at things,' said Shelton. 'I'm a very gentle teacher, I have a very supportive approach to teaching. So, you know, even if you're a complete newbie it doesn't matter ? we start where you're at.'

For Shelton's outdoor classes, the cost is \$35 plus tax for a two-hour session. People can register by calling Shelton at 519-216-8643 or by emailing her at CJ.Shelton@Sympatico.ca.

There are three more outdoor sessions happening this summer, and they're on the following Sundays: July 24, August 7, and August 28. The sessions run from 1 to 3 p.m. and attendees are asked to meet at the main entrance to the Alton Mill Arts Centre.