

BREAKING GROUND

2014

Annual Arts Issue



A PUBLICATION OF THE TENNESSEE COUNCIL ON DEVELOPMENTAL DISABILITIES IN PARTNERSHIP WITH THE TENNESSEE ARTS COMMISSION



KATHY TUPPER

has been creating art for nearly 50 years. In addition to studying art technique throughout her life, she has trained many people in the Nashville area in watercolor techniques. Several of her pieces, incorporating a variety of mediums, have appeared in Breaking Ground.

She's seen it. She's done it. Mixed down deep in the pit of it, she fought it and worked it. She came up fresh on the top of it. She knows it.



SHE SHINES ~ "A Song for Annie C." ~ @KathyTupper 2014

Eyes proud show it—sassy with the grit of it." What she is, she made from it. Above the all of it.

COVER ART

Photo collage by Matthew Drumright and John Guider from The Pujols Family Foundation's 21 Collaborative Art Project.

A LETTER FROM THE EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR TENNESSEE COUNCIL ON DEVELOPMENTAL DISABILITIES



Welcome to the annual Breaking Ground arts issue! What a testament to the talent and expressive gifts of so many Tennesseans from across our state.

The Tennessee Council on Developmental Disabilities has been co-sponsoring the Breaking Ground arts issue for the past two years with the Tennessee Arts Commission. Our agencies have developed a wonderfully collaborative relationship, based on the common passion for making arts programming more inviting to persons with disabilities and their family members, as patrons, and as participants. In this issue you will read about additional projects of the two agencies that bring together various arts programs and the disability community to identify and work on obstacles to making the arts accessible to patrons with disabilities in every region of the state.

Take a moment to share your comments about the content of this issue. We appreciate your feedback, as do the contributors.

Wanda Willis

A MESSAGE FROM THE EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR TENNESSEE ARTS COMMISSION

The Tennessee Arts Commission is excited and proud to be in partnership with the Tennessee Council on Developmental Disabilities to co-sponsor this Annual Arts Issue of Breaking Ground. We salute the work of the Council and appreciate your visionary approach. As the Tennessee Arts Commission launches our new strategic plan and mission statement, we aim to further increase access to the arts for all communities. Our refreshed mission statement is to cultivate the arts for the benefit of all Tennesseans and their communities. Our new strategic plan includes a strategy to expand accessibility, participation and inclusion in the arts for all Tennesseans, as a way to support the thriving Tennessee arts and culture.

The Arts Issue of this magazine is one way in which the Commission promotes a more inclusive and welcoming experience for Tennesseans, including those with disabilities and their advocates. Our Arts Access grant program continues to reach new eligible applicant organizations because of this publication. If Breaking Ground readers have ideas or suggestions about how the Tennessee Arts Commission can expand access to the arts and cultivation of the arts for all Tennessee communities, I hope you will be in touch with our Arts Access director, William Coleman, at william.coleman@tn.gov. We look forward to hearing from you.

Anne B. Pope

A FEW WORDS FROM THE ARTS ACCESS DIRECTOR TENNESSEE ARTS COMMISSION

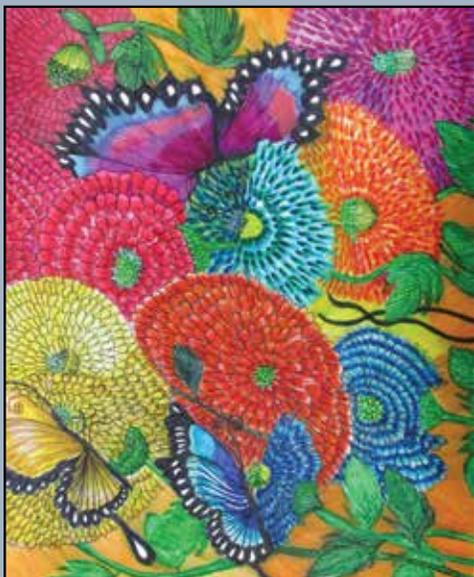
This has been an exciting year for the Commission in the area of arts and disabilities. In 2014, the Commission developed new in-roads in making the arts industry more welcoming to the disability community. We partnered with VSA (Very Special Arts) to develop a series of webinars which serve as training and professional development for artists with disabilities. We've begun a new initiative with the national high school poetry recitation contest, Poetry Out Loud (POL), which pairs students with disabilities with a VSA teaching artist to help prepare them for the competition. In addition, in a robust collaborative project with the Tennessee Council on Developmental Disabilities, we completed a series of community conversations in the state's three grand divisions, whose goal was to bring together the arts and disability communities to develop some best practices for making the arts more welcoming throughout the state. The culmination of the conversation was the development of a best practice guide which is being distributed to arts and disability organizations. New partnerships and inclusive programming are already being developed based on the connections that occurred through these conversations. We are continuing to move forward to seek more ways of supporting inclusive access to the arts for all communities.

William Coleman

FINE ART PAGE 11

Laura Hudson

likes to include beautiful flowers and butterflies in her artwork. She loves bringing enjoyment to others through her creativity.



Color Burst

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SARAH CECELIA ANN MUELLER

was born with spina bifida myelomeningocele, and is the author of Elf-Help Ability Therapy. She is a certified thanatologist and works for the Center for Independent Living of Middle Tennessee as an Independent Living Specialist.



White Noise

ERIC BRITO

is from Murfreesboro and is a member of the Tennessee Mental Health Consumers Association peer center. He enjoys using a wide variety of materials to create different effects.





ANDREW

by Ken Muller

Dear Mrs. Trane,

You don't know me, but I be a neighbor round the corner on Caulder. That yellow house with the picket fence and big Hawthorn looks like blood in October. Well, I wanted to apply fer that job of taking care of yer pa in the days when you be working. Least wise my cousin Roslyn says you need somebody since he had that stroke or you have to put him in a place and you sure don't want to do that to your father. I know him, you see, though not by name. Not for talking neither with him being a professor and all and me working since I was ten and never finished learned good English or nothing. But I know what kind of man he be and how I owe him sorta and that makes me the best to take care of him now. I've never applied for a job before and don't know how to do it right so I'll just tell you straight out and let you ask questions later if you be wanting to.

I'm not a dog person but could tell that your pa was by the way he dealt with Andrew when he walked by every morning. Andy was willed to me by my Aunt Louisa for no reason I could tell, excepting my wife Gail has passed and I had this fenced yard and only one leg since the accident and she always said this dog helped her a lot. If I called this dog Andy he wanted to play but if I called out Andrew he would sit in front of me and stare like I was supposed to tell him what to do. Never could get him to do anything. I guessed that Louisa's feeblemind old years might have been catching or that the dog was just stupid, but people kept telling me Aussie herd dogs were smart. But if I said Andy go out and play he would and liked to bark friendly at passerbys.

Well your pa used to stop walking and stand there by the mailbox and he and Andrew just looked at each other. Pretty soon Andy wanted to go out whenever your pa was going to show up – don't know how, so I started watching from the window. Your pa was doing things with his hands like I've seen in some movies. When Andrew stood by my chair I tried a couple of the things I'd seen and must have done some right for that dog started taking a real interest in me and doing things around the house. Wish now I had talked to your pa some but figured he woulda if he a mind to.

Not sure why I took Andrew over to that Deaf School

over the hill and had some trouble getting in and seeing the right people since I didn't know why I was there. Finally got to see this Mrs. Weaver who said they didn't teach signing to people who weren't hearing impaired, and asked if I had a relative who was hard of hearing. I told her I only had this dog Andrew in the car and wanted to talk to him better. I showed her a couple of the simple things I had learned from watching your pa and she went out to see Andrew and they had quite a chat I'll tell you. Well, the short of it is that I got to go to some classes and learn proper Sign Language if I let her take Andrew around to some other classes. Finally one day Andrew didn't want to get in the car and come home and took me to meet Wanda. She was eighteen and mostly blind and deaf too and wanted to go to college. Somehow Andrew knew she needed him more than me and that was that. Guess I was just a temporary caregiver after all.

Any ways, this house is kinda lonely now and I can Sign pretty good and I knows your pa can even if he can't talk any more. That silly dog was training me for something and I guess it was for his friend that came by every day. I mean your pa. I'm not sure why these things happen, or why sometimes God talks to animals instead of people. Maybe they listen better, or there is some kinda signing language we humans ain't learned yet. All I know is that I'm supposed to help your pa now even if I can't do as many things to help as Andrew. I kin get to your place at seven every morning and stay until you gets home. I can cook and clean some and you don't have to pay me much. I figure maybe your dad can teach me how to read and write so I don't have to get Amy to type like this.

Thanks for reading this. I be home all day waiting for you.

Tommy Phelps

Ken Muller is a Nevada native now residing in Dandridge, TN, with his wife and service dog. He is a Viet Nam vet with a disability, and a history of working with persons with disabilities, both professionally and in community service.



Kit Reuther & Phillip Relford
photo by Mike Lacy

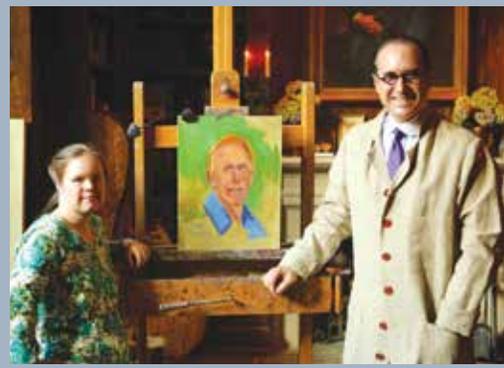
FOUNDATION'S 21 COLLABORATIVE

ART

by Carolyn Naifeh, PFF Regional Director, and Emily May-Ragland, Creative Networking Director, New Life

The Pujols Family Foundation's 21 Collaborative Art Project partnered 21 of Nashville's best artists with individuals with Down syndrome. Todd Perry, CEO and Executive Director of the Pujols Family Foundation and a native of Clarksville, Tennessee, wanted to build awareness of abilities in the Down syndrome community, knowing that the playing field is much more level than people expect.

"People with Down syndrome have amazing creativity," Todd said. "I wanted to combine the skills of local fine artists with the energy and passion of



Dawn Whitelaw & George Goff
photo by Mike Lacy

outcome surpassed our expectations," said Todd.

Nashville-based artists were staggeringly generous with their time and their talent, signing on without knowing

exactly what to expect. Artist Paul Harmon put it this way: "At first, [I was] a bit apprehensive at the idea and feared a collaboration would be unsuccessful and perhaps awkward. My fears were certainly unfounded as the experience was rewarding in every way."

After some initial nervousness, the pair quickly settled into the business of making art together. The partners worked over each other's painting areas, with the result that every area of the painting became a combined, collaborative effort. "What a wonderful reminder of what the essence of art is," said Paul. "Two people making marks together. Ideas and forms and color. Two people talking as if at a table enjoying a fine meal together, and each adding to and altering the other one's graphic conversation."

Photographer John Guider credited his project partner Matthew Drumright for every aspect of their collaboration: "It was his idea to photograph other people with Down



Paul Harmon & Bernadette Resha
photo by Mike Murrin

this community."

We asked each artist-partner pair to create an original work of art together based on the number 21, as Down syndrome occurs when there is an extra twenty-first chromosome. "The

THE PUJOLS FAMILY PROJECT

Dawn Whitelaw & George Goff;

photo by Mike Lacy



Picture of Manuel Cuevas & Jessica Crowell; photo by Rachael Ragland.

and Phillip Relford, each 42 years old, and both of whom commuted two hours each way for their sessions. Kit said, "Art-making can be scary and intimidating, but Phillip showed up with his baseball cap on, ready to work! I wanted our first session to be fun and relaxed – just sitting at a table playing with a variety of art supplies."

As they dove in, Kit had the opportunity to learn about Phillip's interests: pro-baseball,

syndrome," said John. "It was his connection that allowed us into Michael Gomez's studio. It was his idea to do a collage. He made the images. He made the background. And he gave it the title. All I did was sit in the background and smile in amazement."

Artists Dawn Whitelaw and Kit Reuther worked with George Goff

pizza, his best friend George, as well as learning of the recent death of Phillip's father. "My heart went out to him as he talked about both of his parents' deaths and his transitioning situation at home – all while meticulously continuing to work on his designs," Kit said. "Our second meeting was like old friends getting together."

Dawn Whitelaw first met with George Goff at his studio in Winchester before meeting with him at her studio in Franklin. He took their canvas, along with paints and brushes, back to Winchester to work on during the week. The next time they met, she surprised him with two portraits she'd painted of him to flank either side of their landscape, making it a triptych. "Before I actually met George, I had lots of ideas about how our canvas could look," Dawn recalled. "Once I met George and saw him painting, all my pre-conceived ideas of how the project would unfold flew out the window."



Guy Gilchrist & Will McMillan photo by Todd Perry



Picture of Katie Hamilton & Alan LeQuire; photo by Mike Lacy

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THE PUJOLS FAMILY FOUNDATION'S

21 COLLABORATIVE ART PROJECT

...CONTINUED

Dawn presented a selection of local landscape photos for George to choose from. After reviewing all the images he made a firm decision. "We talked about how artists could often make clear choices about the images that appeal to them," said Dawn. "This was one of many ways we were able to connect as painters. That's exactly how my choices of subject matter are made. I know George and I will learn a lot from each other. I feel like I have gained a painting friend."

James Threalkill & Matt Kirschenman
photo by Mike Lacy

George and Dawn plan to continue meeting. So do artist Anna Jaap and her partner, Clayton Huffman. Clayton's mother says this has been a special and unique learning experience for her son: 'My artist Anna Jaap' as Clayton calls her, "is delightful and has been so enthusiastic about working with Clayton. She is patient with him and so friendly to both of us - seeking ways to make him comfortable and engaging in conversation as they work." Cartoonist Guy Gilchrist and his partner Will McMillan

bonded over a common love for Chuck Norris and martial arts. That turned into a conversation on how both had experienced bullying and the kinds of tools that can help empower individuals. That discussion lead to a comic book for their project called Billy and Kazuma!

Painter Andee Rudloff and her partner, Andrew Donaldson, created an 8' x 8' mural with all of Andrew's favorite things. Artist James Threalkill and Matt Kirschenman painted Matt's sister, who died earlier this year. With outstretched arms, surrounded by butterflies, looking out for Matt from her new world, the mural is profoundly personal, and healing as well.

So many wonderful stories to tell; too little space. We want to acknowledge the number of other participating artists, including Roger Dale Brown, Manuel Cuevas, Camille Engel, Mary Addison Hackett, Alan LeQuire, Larry McCormack, Ed Nash, Michael Shane Neal, Roy Overcast, Jim Sherraden, Herb Williams, Jorge Yances and Lain York.

All of our participating artists gained a new perspective on disability through their collaborations. Their partners gained a lot of hard-earned and well-deserved pride. The rest of us got to see firsthand just how creative and talented individuals with disabilities can be. Because of its success in Tennessee, we plan to take the Pujols Family Foundation's 21 Collaborative Art Project to other states in 2015.

Andee Rudloff & Andrew Donaldson
photo by Stacey Irvin

Anna Jaap & Clayton Huffman; photo by Graeme Huffman



Matthew Drumright & John Guider
set the scene; photo by John Williams



A CHATTANOOGA VENUE FOR NON-TRADITIONAL ART

by Ellen Heavilon and Brooke Lawrence Montague

Photos by HART gallery staff



HART Gallery Tennessee in Chattanooga is a 501c3 not-for-profit organization with the mission of offering homeless persons and other non-traditional artists, including those with mental health issues and intellectual or physical disabilities, the opportunity to create and sell their artwork for their benefit. We advertise and sell any work that is considered commercially viable, and when a piece is sold, the artist keeps 60%, the gallery retains 30%, and 10% is donated to a charitable organization of the artist's choice. We

support the development of artists within our target populations in two primary ways: through open studio hours at the HART Gallery, and in community outreach classes, which are held at other resource agencies that are able to provide class space.

Our open studio hours are Wednesdays and Thursdays from 12:00-5:00 pm. Here, artists are invited to create in the gallery and have the option of using the materials that we provide. HART Gallery serves a meal on those days to our artists and staff. Sharing these meals is an important part of our week, as it allows us to build relationships and a sense of community with one another.

Our weekly community outreach classes involve a diverse population throughout Chattanooga, including the homeless and transient, low-income seniors, at-risk inner-city youth, and individuals with mental health issues and intellectual or physical disabilities.

One of these community classes is an art therapy group led by Brooke Montague (MA Art Therapy) at Siskin Rehabilitation Hospital every Wednesday. Siskin is a not-for-profit hospital dedicated to meeting a wide variety of rehabilitation needs through a full continuum of patient care services. Our weekly art therapy class is considered part of Siskin's outpatient treatment programing for traumatic brain injury survivors. Each week, artists are led in relaxation and guided imagery exercises followed by an art therapy instruction.

For example, in one exercise, artists were asked to respond to questions such as, "What is in your heart?" and, "What are your abilities?" For the first question, artists were prompted to create a heart out of pictorial collage and, while using only their sense of touch, a background through finger-painting.

One of the artists who has regularly attended both our open studio hours at HART gallery and our art therapy group at Siskin is Michael Boyette. Michael has been diagnosed with multiple system atrophy, a rare neurological disorder that affects the body's involuntary functions- such as heart rate and digestion. It is a degenerative condition that is typically fatal.

Michael is also a true renaissance man: musician and singer/songwriter, illustrator and author. He has played keyboard with well-known musicians including E.G Kith and Lonnie Mack, and Michael's blues band, "The House Rockers," has opened for headlining acts such as B.B. King. In addition to his musical talents and achievements Michael is currently writing and illustrating a children's book series.

As a not-for-profit agency, HART Gallery is an organization with the expressed mission of serving others, and yet, as staff members, we consistently find ourselves receiving much more than we're able to give. Every week, our work brings us in contact with inspiring individuals who find a way to create beauty, to give the best parts of themselves to others, and to rise above circumstances that seem overwhelming to an outsider.

Michael is one of those inspirational people. Because of his diagnosis, Michael is determined to create a legacy for his young daughters through his artwork. He has used his time in our classes and in open studio hours to create portraits of his daughters, and to work on the children's book series mentioned above, which he is writing for them. It is his hope that this work will provide a way for his daughters to remember and connect to his spirit when he can no longer be here for them.



We at HART Gallery have been honored to get to know Michael. We thought we'd leave you with some of his own words, an excerpt from one of his songs, "Just a Dream I Had", on the album, *At the Mercy of Love*, recorded by his band, *Motogroover* and *The Kings of Soul*.

*And now that I'm here, it sounds so clear
like a voice with the choice to be free, like me...
I knew all along
when I wrote this song
my fingers would play anyway,
the clouds would melt away,
I'd be standing up tall,
loving it all.
I'd be playing with a groove, making my move
And that's just a dream I had.*



#9

TABITHA PAIGE WEST was diagnosed with a not-so-rare genetic syndrome called 1p36 Deletion Syndrome at the age of 1½. Tabitha has been painting with her bare hands since the age of 2. She has won awards in the Expressions of Courage Art Contest for People with Epilepsy, and her artwork is currently on display at Village Green Hills in the “Artable Collection.”



The Wharf

SHREE LYNN BROWN-MCGRUDER

of Nashville has been making art independently while she pursues an on-line graduate course in art graphics. She likes to bring light into her pictures, and adds details to make the scene come to life.



Creek

GATLIN MCPHERSON

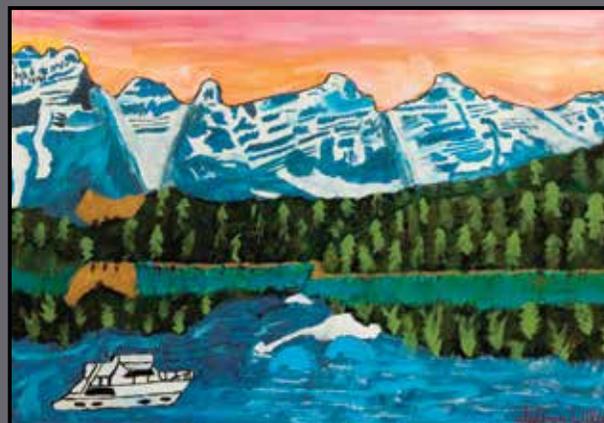
is a 29-year-old with cerebral palsy who specializes in computer-generated paintings. He lives in Knoxville.

GRACE WALKER GOAD

is a young adult artist on the autism spectrum whose artistic talent was discovered at age four. Her work has been featured on The View, Al Jazeera America, magazines and book covers, and various newspaper and online media outlets.



Patchwork



Alaskan Mountains

LEANN WILSON

of Clarksville used a photograph of the mountains in Alaska to paint her realistic “Alaskan Mountains”. She finds art calming and likes to make colorful pictures.

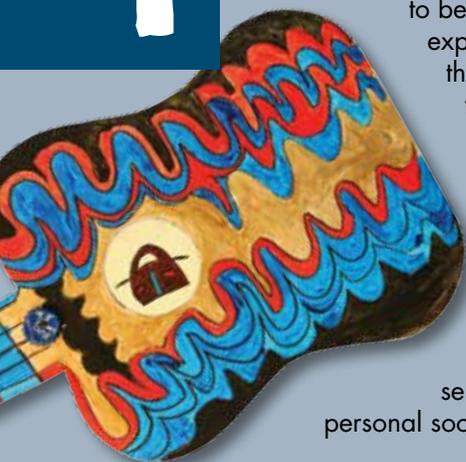
ART FOR

Article and photos by
Pam VanGilder

EXPLORING THE CREATIVE SIDE OF MEMPHIS

T

he Art for All summer workshop in Memphis offers teens and young adults with intellectual disabilities the opportunity to become involved in arts experiences that broaden their world view, guide them through the creative process, and empower them to transform these experiences into creative self-expression. The goal of the program is to use the arts as a vehicle for developing self-awareness, confidence, self-expression, creativity and personal social skills.



Art for All originally began as a program of New Day Children's Theatre in Collierville. However, as several of the participants passed the age of 18, the program no longer fit under the New Day age limit. It is now under the umbrella of Madonna Learning Center, a school and vocational training program for children and young adults with disabilities. The 2014 two-week summer program was funded in part by the Tennessee Arts Commission.

As you will see from the text and photos below, Art for All was a diverse learning opportunity!

MEMPHIS MUSIC

"In the Mississippi Delta, they sang about the sweat and the strain" - Kenneth Jackson, The Blues Story

Memphis music is easily recognizable, but to know where it started and how it came into being is to listen with a greater awareness and appreciation. Kenneth Jackson, blues artist and educator, taught the participants about the rich history of Memphis music. They learned about field hollers, and how to express their feelings through the extension of their voice. At the beginning of the week there was some trepidation, as the learners found it challenging to elongate their voices in song. A couple of days later there was no hesitation as they had fun expressing their feelings with their newly discovered vocal abilities. They learned to listen to their friends' songs and repeat them through call and response. Then they wrote and performed work songs based on cooking and doing chores. They also learned the 12-bar blues pattern and composed their own version based on Memphis music legends.

The participants also enjoyed touring the Stax Museum, listening to the distinctive Memphis sound, studying the artifacts of the history of Memphis music, and even taking some time to dance.



This summer the Memphis culture, both past and present, was the focus of the program, which included field trips to Tom Lee Park, Stax Museum, the Old Forest, Central BBQ and Overton Square. Four master teaching artists from the Memphis community worked with the students to deepen their understanding of their community through related arts activities.

ALL 2014



NARRATIVE THEATER

Expressive language, the act of putting thoughts into words and then articulating those words with clarity and feeling can be very challenging to individuals with intellectual disabilities. Alice Berry, actress, director, and theatre professor at the University of Memphis, drew personal stories from the participants, encouraging sensory language that was then transformed into scenes incorporating auditory, visual and kinesthetic language. By recalling feelings and memories, the attendees selected descriptive vocabulary to relate their stories through language and movement.

Most of the participants were unfamiliar with the Old Forest, an ecological system hundreds of years old in the city of Memphis. After exploring the forest they recreated the experience in the workshop.



NARRATIVE AND DANCE

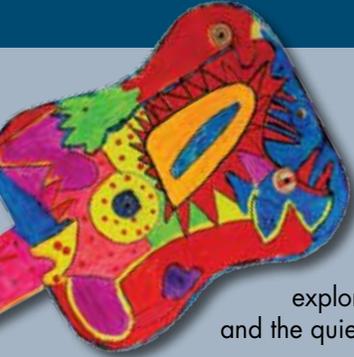
Movement is our first language. Through gesture we communicate, through movement we explore our world and develop relationships. The visual and kinesthetic senses are natural pathways to learning for many individuals with intellectual disabilities. Erin D. H. Williams,

CONTINUED...



ART FOR ALL 2014

EXPLORING THE CREATIVE SIDE OF MEMPHIS



...CONTINUED

dancer, yoga teacher and movement specialist at Madonna Learning Center, used the language of dance to explore the movement qualities of the river and the quiet, almost hidden details of the forest.

Watching the river, feeling the wind, listening to the sounds of nature at Tom Lee Park helped them to recreate the experience through movement and dance. Through kinesthetic experiences the cognitive processing of language is instinctually understood and meaningful moments of personal self-expression are then created.



at the river, on the patio in front of the Memphis mural at Central BBQ, and while viewing the sculptures and urban art throughout Overton Square. Returning to the studio they created paintings from their drawings and transferred some of their images onto guitar shaped wooden forms, making works of folk art that aptly represented their varied and rich experiences during the two weeks.

Pam VanGilder lives in Germantown and is the mom of a daughter with a disability. She is also a graduate of the 2013-14 Partners in Policymaking™ class

VISUAL ARTS

Under the guidance of visual artist and teacher, Anne Froning, participants drew inspiration from their Memphis experiences to create personal works of art. They toured Memphis, sketchbook in hand, to capture images and ideas for their art. They drew



LONELINESS, JUDGMENT AND HOPE

LONELINESS



by Joyce Sievers

Painted in 1973, these three paintings are the culmination of my undergrad thesis for a BA in art. My daughter, Beth, who had an intellectual disability as a result of oxygen deprivation during birth, was the focus of my paintings. Beth was in her early teens at the time of the paintings and my purpose was to express our experiences of loneliness, judgment and hope in our lives.

My medium is acrylic paint on 3 x 4 ft. gesso canvas, in four basic colors: ultramarine blue, umber, burnt umber and white. The paintings are double framed.

The first painting, "Loneliness", symbolizes the exclusion, separation, isolation and loneliness that one can experience when one is "labeled"; in Beth's case, "mental retardation" at the Child Development Clinic at the University of Iowa. Our culture held few expectations of an individual with that "label" contributing to society and, therefore, offered little support.

The second painting, "Judgment", symbolizes the harsh, narrow, limiting, even cruel, perspective and finger pointing at one perceived as "different". Again, there were few expectations from society that Beth would become all that she could be, unaware of her unique gifts, ignoring her abilities. The judgment seemed to be



JUDGMENT

that individuals with an intellectual disability had little value.

The third painting, "Hope", symbolizes our process through the Doman-Delacato program for individuals who had experienced brain injuries in the late '60s. The Doman-Delacato Program was one of intensive sensory stimulation, based on the premise that undamaged brain cells can be programmed

to take over the function of damaged cells. Over the three-year period that we did the program, working 14 hours a day and relying on a huge family of volunteers, Beth acquired many skills.

The puzzle pieces across the base of the paintings and up into her hair note her learning to crawl, hop, skip, ride a bike, and read, indicating a life coming together, with a small cameo of parental support. Ultimately, this led to Beth living a life as independently as possible, with loneliness and judgment overcome.

There is no doubt that Beth became a contributing member in the life of her community, one of the first in her local pool of individuals with developmental disabilities to live in her own apartment. She became a self-advocate and president of Tennessee's People First organization in the early '90s. As such, she preceded her mother as a member of the Tennessee Council on Developmental Disabilities!

Beth was a member of her community throughout her adulthood, working the last eight years of her life as a valued employee of O'Charley's restaurant in Cookeville. Beth never missed the opportunity to exercise her right to vote or support her favorite teams in the sports world, whether local or national. In 2001, Beth was diagnosed with mesothelioma and passed away in 2002. She remains, in her life and death, one of the greatest teachers I have ever had!

What a gift.

Joyce Sievers is an artist, writer and art instructor; a graduate of the 1993-94 Partners in Policymaking class and a former chair of the Tennessee Council on Developmental Disabilities



HOPE



I DIDN'T SEE COMING

by Lynn Jackson

Life has many interesting twists and turns that we do not always anticipate.

Which is probably a good thing, because if we could see what life has in store for us, we would probably run in the opposite direction! Five years ago, if you had told me that I would meet a lot of interesting people and travel to some fun and fascinating places - but to do it, I would have to be sight impaired - I don't think I would have taken you up on the offer. Of all the problems I thought I would encounter in life as I got older, I never would have guessed that loss of sight would be my fate.

YOU'VE GOT TO LAUGH ABOUT IT

I like to say that it has, so far, been an eye-opening experience. (That's blind humor for you). And I certainly didn't see it coming. One thing that's been a saving grace for me is the large amount of humor that can be found in being visually impaired. Or maybe I just have a warped sense of humor.

Take for example the time a friend found me sitting in the library. Not very funny on the face of it, but when you consider it, the library is not the most user-friendly place for a person with vision loss. My friend was so surprised to see me, she shouted my name and then asked, "What are you doing in the library and how on earth did you get here?" I guess I should explain I was just sitting in the library lobby.

Often I forget that I can no longer see very well. And this was one of my first trips out by myself. I was so excited to take my first bus ride that I didn't think of the destination! When the accessible transportation reservationist asked where I'm going, I had to give a street address including the actual number. The only address I could think of was the library. So off to the library I went!

It wasn't until I got there, that it dawned on me that I couldn't see the book titles or the audio book cases. Live and learn I guess!

FROM LIGHT TO DARK

I have also learned during this journey that blindness falls along a continuum from some light perception to being in total darkness. I'm considered legally blind, so much of what I see is either distorted or in shadow. There is little to no detail; only silhouette. I can see well enough to avoid walking into a dark solid wood door, but a transparent glass one might give me a little trouble. People appear as dark shapes and, depending on the lighting, sometimes I can only make out their clothing. Imagine seeing just a shirt walking towards you. I know it's a person but I often think of Casper the Friendly Ghost! (Some people may be too young for that reference.)

THAT

DON'T TAKE MY KEYS

My loss of sight began about 18 months before a stroke moved me into the disabled column. Before the stroke, I was still driving every day. Though I will admit it was not very far and not very well - I was out there on the road with everybody else. I could see about two car lengths ahead of me, on a good day. I could usually see the red lights. The green lights were harder to see unless I was sitting right under them.

I usually did what the rest of the traffic was doing. If the other cars stopped, so would I. When they'd go I would follow the traffic. I never wanted to be the first one at the traffic light. Let me just say that this method of driving was not foolproof, but FYI, there are more of us sight-impaired drivers on the road than you fully-sighted people realize!

The reason these people are still driving is the fear of the loss of independence. I could not imagine life without the ability to drive. I had been driving since I was 13 years old, and could not imagine life without a car. I had to keep my advancing loss of sight a secret from the world, or the world would have taken away my car keys.

And I bought a GPS which told me where I was and when I needed to turn.

FAKE IT TILL YOU MAKE IT

Most other things I could still see well enough to manage. At work however, my primary job function was reading. As I coached people on resume writing or interviewing skills, I would have them read to me, with the explanation that they would be able to hear the typos and mistakes better if they read the document aloud.

I had many coping mechanisms to make up for my failing sight. I always arrived early for lunch or dinner with friends, clients or family because I couldn't see them from across the room, so I would position myself where they could see me as they came into the restaurant. I knew that once they saw me they would call out my name or greet me in some way, and I could tell who it was from the sound of their voice.

Occasionally I would have to ride with someone else and finding them was a real challenge, because I couldn't see into the car to see the driver! Unless I knew what the car looked like, I ran the risk of getting into the wrong car. And how would I explain that little mistake?

Only a few friends and coworkers noticed that my sight was getting worse. One friend said she wondered why I walked past my own car in the parking lot after dinner one evening. Well, the fact is, I couldn't see my car from the door of the restaurant to the parking lot. Also, as the light diminishes, so does my ability to see. When we entered the restaurant, the sun was still up; after dinner it was dark. Getting caught out in the street at dusk or at night was a little scary.

Although bright sunshine could make it hard to navigate too. I've only hit two other cars - slight taps on their bumpers because I have no sight in my left eye and no depth perception. Did you know that it takes both eyes to perceive depth? (I found out when I went to see the big summer blockbuster movie Avatar. I was wondering what all the hype was about because I could only see the 3-D effect around the edges of the screen!)

I felt bad for the first driver I hit, because she was visiting the city for the first time, and apparently I was the third person to hit her car since she started her Memphis vacation. She vowed to never come back! And she was from Atlanta! We all know that they can't drive!

THEY WENT THAT A-WAY

I have always been a student of human behavior, but now I really use it. I have a hard time finding glass doors, especially the automatic sliding kind. But I have learned that if I just watch where the crowd is going, I will find the door. When I see several people disappear through a wall then I go there too, and so far it's been a door, and not a portal to another dimension! However, this following others doesn't work every time. I once followed a man into an intersection to cross the street. Suddenly I saw movement on my right. Traffic on one of the busiest streets in town was advancing toward us! I called out to the man, "Mister, I was following you to cross the street and now the light has changed! You're gonna get us killed!" To which he replied, "Oh lady, don't follow me, I like to walk in traffic. I've been doing it all my life!" I thought to myself: leave it to me to follow a guy with a death wish.

Now I ask people to help me across the street. They're more likely to get me there in one piece.

BACK TO SCHOOL

I've enjoyed all the learning that has to take place when you lose your sight. Moving through a crowd; getting dressed in the morning; or something as simple as sewing on a button takes on a whole new level of complexity when you can't see it. I recall getting frustrated during my Braille class and telling the teacher that the lesson would go much better if I could see the Braille dots! She paused and gently reminded me that if I could see the dots then I wouldn't need the Braille.

Oh, the logic of the blind. I didn't see that one coming!

Lynn Jackson is a graduate of the 2013-14 Partners in Policymaking class

IN DARKNESS WAITS DARKNESS WAITS

In darkness waits
A soul, yearning for
The Light –
Questing for greatness
Beyond imagination.

Only the soul searches
Outward, not inward,
Succumbing to the host's
Devine complication.

Teaching her stories
And burdens to bear -
Web of ebony
It is ever weaving

Grasping for its
Insignificance, not
Holding to His purpose,
And thoughts of hope
Begin their leaving.

Leading her down paths
Of false promise
Ever its trap it is wielding

But acknowledging such
Inevitable defeat
Only leads her heart
To further yielding

Waiting – always waiting –
Softly she calls out
Longing for His presence
To be known

Her darkened spirit
Asks for a new resolve,
Beckons The Sun back to
His home.

Like the miracle
Of birth itself
The Sun rises
In shades of
Brilliance untold

This breaks her clouds
And the eclipse on her heart –
Finally –
Shining in the direction
Where brighter stories
May unfold

By April Meredith

April Meredith was born and raised in Knoxville, graduated from ETSU, lived and worked nearly a decade in Japan, and was diagnosed as an adult with RP (retinitis pigmentosa). She is an active member of the National Federation of the Blind and People First of Tennessee, and is a participant in the 2014-15 Partners in Policymaking Leadership Institute.

I HAVE BROKEN OUR COVENANT by M. S. Craft

The Holy Book,
Without much look,
Says to honor
Your mother
And father.

But I have
Dishonored
My father.

I have
Broken
Our covenant.
I am drowning
In the flood
Of shame,
And my blood
Boils all the same.

I am lost
In the caves
Of guilt.
But it is more
Than just mere
Frost
That I fear.

It is the craves
And graves
I do not hear.

It has been
More
Than a year.
But I do not
Feel
Any cheer.

I am caught
In an old
Reel
Of cold
And shame.

And my blood
Boils
All the same
Like war's spoils.

I have
Broken
Our covenant.
And you have spoken.

But behind
The locked door
Lies more
Just a juvenile work
Of some kind.

There lies
Behind our eyes
A mirror,
Our gazes
Staring back
At us.

You may see
A sea
Of silliness.
But I –
I behold
The beauty
Of myself.

I have
Broken
Our covenant,
And you have spoken.

But the entity
You have forbidden
And hope
Not to have ridden
For an eternity
Is part
Of who I am.

Please open
Your heart,
For this,
This is who
I am.

Matt Craft has been writing fiction and poetry since he turned nine years old. As Matt states in his autobiography, "The Craft of Writing: The Life and Stories of the Matts," his writing began as a fun hobby and "morphed" into a coping mechanism for dealing with his disability.

LAND OF LATEX GLOVES by David S. Pointer

Rex had enrolled in the surgery technology classes making wonderful progress always able to share personal post-operative stories from twenty-five surgeries on brain, spine and other vital areas... then it was learned he had a latex allergy that could prove fatal just by scrubbing up and dressing out for medical duties that most other staff performed without ever considering that

a required piece of job clothing might kill a differently abled coworker with a sensitivity, and then I saw him shopping in his power-chair working to formulate another great dream where he could assist sick people without becoming an unintended casualty

David S. Pointer lives in Murfreesboro, and is the father of a daughter with a visual disability.

TALKIN' 'BOUT ART & INCLUSION

by Ned Andrew Solomon

Photos by TAC staff

Sometimes all it takes is dumping colored paper, markers, Playdoh and chocolates on a table to get people from different worlds together. At least that's what William Coleman and I were hoping, as we anxiously waited for guests to arrive for our very first community conversation on the arts at the Tennessee Arts Commission (TAC) offices in downtown Nashville.

William is TAC's Arts Access Director, and in that role he strives to make sure ALL people, including those with disabilities, can access the arts in their communities throughout our state. Here at the Council we work to promote the inclusion of persons with disabilities in ALL aspects of their daily lives. So, you can see where this has become a natural collaboration between the two state agencies.

Over the course of a couple of planning months, William and I decided to try to bring together representatives from arts programming entities, persons with disabilities who appreciate the arts, and representatives from disability organizations to have a discussion about making the arts more accessible and welcoming to patrons with disabilities. Right out of the box we booked "conversations" in Nashville and in Chattanooga, hoping that we'd get to West Tennessee as well before the end of the fiscal year.

William worked on getting the arts programming reps there – staff and in some cases directors – and I worked on getting my colleagues from the disability community to the table. To prep for the event and to make the most of our two-hour timeframe, we sent out a few pre-questions to those who accepted the invite. We asked:

- 1 What would an inclusive, barrier-free arts experience look like?
- 2 As an arts program rep, what has been your most challenging and most successful experience in trying to provide support for a patron with a disability?
- 3 As a disability community rep, what has been your most challenging and best experience when attending an arts event?

The day of the conversation, I "grounded" the attendees with a presentation on disability sensitivity and awareness. Then we dove right in to the pre-questions, which made for a lively discussion about things that went very wrong, and things that went very right. We talked about interacting with people who have diverse communication abilities. We talked about reasonable and beyond the expected accommodations and adaptations to the arts experience. We talked about the benefits of planning with a patron in advance of his or her first visit to the arts venue. We talked about the struggles of making our events physically accessible, particularly in those venues that are historic landmarks. We talked about strategies for dealing with disruptive guests, or rude, misinformed staff.

Basically, we covered the waterfront. The good news is we had the "experts", persons with disabilities or family members of persons with disabilities, who could make suggestions about an approach that might have been more successful. In other good news, patrons with disabilities discovered that several arts venues had already made significant inroads to being more inclusive, by offering sensory-sensitive performances, closed-captioning, audio description, Braille publications, or more wheelchair accessible seating options.



Reps from disability and arts organizations gather at the TAC in Nashville.

In more good news, reps from both communities offered to continue to be a resource for each other, for those times when situations arise that require a little outside support, and to help market the performances of venues who were putting their best feet forward in reaching out to diverse audiences.

In even more good news, the conversations got bigger and more animated as we moved from Nashville to Chattanooga and then to Memphis.

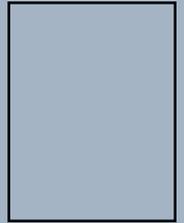
The exceptionally good news is that after William and I were done blabbing, folks hung around, in some cases an hour after our designated time, to continue the conversation, or to make arrangements for on-site visits and tours that might bring about even more program and venue adaptations.

The bad news was...well, there really wasn't any. Folks from both sides felt heard, and were able to let down some of their defenses and preconceived notions about what each other had to offer, and what each other was willing to do to create a more positive arts experience.

Ned Andrew Solomon is the director of the Partners in Policymaking Leadership Institute and the editor-in-chief of Breaking Ground.

Tennessee Council on Developmental Disabilities

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TINA BRUNETTI

always knew she would be an artist, and her love for animals led her to draw them as one of her central subjects. Tina also has a hearing disability and wears a hearing aid in her left ear and a cochlear implant in her right ear. She lives in Loudon.



It's ZE-LION!