

breaking ground

2023 ANNUAL
ARTS ISSUE

ISSUE 113

breaking ground



COVER: *Before the Fall* - Lauren Whipple is an artist based in Johnson City, Tennessee, where she is pursuing her BFA in painting at East Tennessee State University with a minor in women's, gender, and sexuality studies. Her work explores the psychological and physical spaces women occupy when confronting issues of gender and sexuality through autobiographical details of her own life.



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VIEW A VIDEO VERSION OF ANOTHER WORK FROM KATIE HAMILTON.



LISTEN TO ORIGINAL RAP SONG "NO AUDIO," BY CJ RIPPIN'

Learn more about the Tennessee Council on Developmental Disabilities. 615.532.6615 | www.tn.gov/cdd | www.facebook.com/TNCouncilonDD | Tnddc@tn.gov
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Tennessee Council on Developmental Disabilities

Our guidepost, the Developmental Disabilities Act, reminds us that disability is a natural part of the human experience. I believe art and creative expression are foundational ways this principle shows up every day in our lives. Through the arts, we can express the range of our emotions – joy, sadness, wanderlust, curiosity. We use art to connect in a way that is deeply personal to both the artist and the viewer.

This year, we are again honored to dedicate a special issue of our magazine, *Breaking Ground*, to Tennessee artists and creative writers with disabilities. The pieces in these pages represent so many types of creative expression. We are fortunate to live in a time where movement and sound, such as music and dance, can be shared using technology. You'll see QR codes within this publication that can take you to interactive content, and our digital version includes photos of artists with their works..

All the art submissions this year were truly stellar. We wish we could have published every one of them. A special thanks goes to our Council's communications committee, who spent hours reviewing and narrowing down the submissions to what you will experience in the following pages. And thank you to our partners, the Tennessee Arts Commission and Borderless Arts Tennessee, who support our state's artists with disabilities in countless ways.

Enjoy!

—Lynette Porter, Deputy Director, TN Council on Developmental Disabilities

TN Arts Commission

In 2022, though we saw nonprofits starting in-person programming again, we know that virtual programming, which expanded during the pandemic, is here to stay.

Many arts organizations suffered losses in revenues, staff, and the ability to provide programming during the pandemic. To address these losses, one-time federal funds helped more than 150 TN arts nonprofits, including those serving people with disabilities.

Throughout this last year, the National Endowment for the Arts (NEA) has continued its focus on people with disabilities. This includes activities to make sure that:

- People with disabilities are included in arts programming;
- People with disabilities are represented as artists; and
- State arts agencies continue to listen, develop partnerships, and provide education for the advancement of people with disabilities.

As a result of this focus, the Tennessee Arts Commission plans to explore ways we can partner with organizations providing arts programming for people with disabilities.

The world has changed, but the Tennessee Arts Commission's commitment to its partners, like the Council and Borderless Arts Tennessee, continues. We look forward to a bright future in providing arts programming to all Tennesseans.

—Kim Johnson, Director of Arts Access, Tennessee Arts Commission



Borderless Arts Tennessee

Borderless Arts Tennessee is honored to be a partner in the arts issue of *Breaking Ground*. As you page through this edition, we challenge you to look beyond the surface and take a closer look at the impact the arts have in the lives of those with disabilities.

For many, the arts become their channel to communicate with the world around them. For others, the arts serve as a connection for social engagement with their peers. For some, the arts are a therapeutic method of building muscles or releasing emotions. For a few, the arts have become a means of financial independence.

Regardless of what role the arts are playing, the arts are not serving as the "icing on the cake" but as the ingredient that holds life together and provides that cake with its texture and taste. We hope you enjoy this slice of what the arts are providing to those with disabilities throughout our state.

—Lori Kissinger, Borderless Arts Tennessee



We Are All Perfectly Imperfect

By Samantha Siedlecki

Paradise Shells & Fine Jewelry by Samantha is Born

Why are no two snowflakes identical? For the same reason no two seashells are identical.

Paradise Shells & Fine Jewelry by Samantha took shape on the beach in Jupiter, Florida – my paradise! I wanted to give my mom a special birthday present. Something one-of-a-kind. My mom is Wonder Woman, by the way! My dad and I harvested seashells and I thought, “What if we used them to make molds to create fine jewelry in precious metals, as a gift for my mom?” So, we did it, and Paradise Shells & Fine Jewelry by Samantha was born! The resulting jewelry was exceptionally beautiful and naturally finished. Just like no two snowflakes are identical, it is true that no two seashells are identical. Each of our jewelry designs is like no other!

We made the decision to leave the seashell imperfections right there where they belong. We allowed the natural imperfections to remain, rather than buffing them out during the process. For this reason, **Paradise Shells & Fine Jewelry designs are “perfectly imperfect,” just like each and every one of us!**

My initial thought was simply to make jewelry for my mom’s birthday. But then people started asking me, “Can you make jewelry like this for me?” So, I thought, “Is there a business here?”



Samantha Siedlecki

Hi, I’m Samantha

Hi, I’m Samantha Siedlecki, President & Founder of Paradise Shells and Fine Jewelry by Samantha. As a female entrepreneur with cerebral palsy, I pour my whole heart and soul into this company, our fine jewelry products, and our customers. I am working hard to set an example for others with challenges. I hope to inspire them to pursue their dreams.

My vision for Paradise Shells & Fine Jewelry by Samantha is to create a pathway toward greater income and connectedness for people with and without challenges. We launched in October 2021, in time for a successful holiday shopping season. And now our social media presence is rapidly expanding and bringing in new customers. This, combined with speaking engagements, is enabling me to meet new and fascinating people every day!

Why it Matters

People with challenges, who are exceptionally valuable members of society, are often less frequently employed and earn less than peers without challenges. I believe Paradise Shells & Fine Jewelry by Samantha can help reshape the future by example of what people with and without challenges can accomplish when working purposefully together. Anything is possible! Entrepreneurship and self-determination in a business with social vision can help overcome barriers and build bridges or connectedness.

Look Before You Leap

I earned my Master of Science in Social Work Degree from the University of Tennessee and a Bachelor of Science Degree in Psychology and Family Studies from Lipscomb University. However, one of the best experiences I had preparing to launch Paradise Shells & Fine Jewelry by Samantha was taking a course called Entrepreneurship Essentials from Harvard Business School online. I loved this course and highly recommend it to anyone who is thinking about becoming an entrepreneur. It will help you to learn to evaluate priorities, opportunities, and risk factors.

Also, if you have a disability, be mindful of the implications your venture may have on your Social Security benefits! For my family and me, Paradise Shells & Fine Jewelry allows me to fulfill my passion, learn business, and create connectedness. But it will never jeopardize my Social Security benefits. This is a trade-off I accept.

How ECF Choices Helped Me

In 2019, Vocky Turner was assigned as my United Healthcare care coordinator in the Employment and Community First CHOICES program. (Editor's note: ECF CHOICES is a state program that provides home- and community-based services to Tennesseans with intellectual and developmental disabilities.) I immediately connected with Vocky – she is kind, encouraging, knowledgeable, and truly passionate about helping people succeed. We discussed the importance of participating

in meaningful work and community, despite having a disability. Vocky could see how eager I was to work. She recommended me for the Pathways Internship program, which I am still a part of. I now assist on the UHC Advocacy Team and am so grateful for the comradery and team building culture. This work, combined with my leadership at Paradise Shells, gives me tremendous professional fulfillment. My new UHC care coordinator is Darian Springs, and she is also very helpful.

Results

Paradise Shells & Fine Jewelry by Samantha became a family effort and my passion. My mom and dad are experienced business professionals who take care of the administrative side of the business. I focus on fulfilling my strategic vision for the company. I pay particular attention to jewelry design, social media, authoring articles, and speaking engagements.

I am grateful to my family, the Employment and Community First CHOICES program, and our customers for all their support!

To learn more about our jewelry designs and vision, please visit www.paradiseshells.com and follow us:

- **Instagram:** @paradiseshellsjewelry
- **Facebook:** Paradise Shells & Fine Jewelry by Samantha
- **TikTok:** paradiseshellsjewelry



Dad - Pace Johnson



Untitled - Katie Z



Squirrel - Meg Best



Untitled - Jessica Lawhorn



Untitled I - Sophia Gulley



Winter Evening - Amanda McCord



Untitled - Nick Ransom



Bottle - Jonathan Phillippi's paintings embrace imagination, process, and chance. Using highly watery paints, he lets the paint flow, as colors swirl and seep. He often uses black, hinting at mystery and intrigue. Jon also utilizes the medium of sculpture to express playfulness and a curious dichotomy between minimalism and obsession. He lives in Nashville and has recently shown at Zeitgeist Gallery with the artist Richard Feaster.



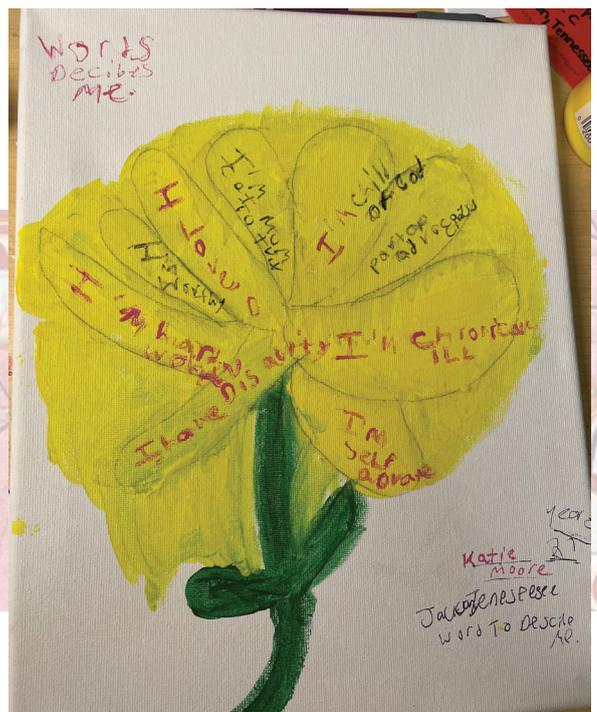
Beautiful Fall Colors - Jessica McFarland of Chattanooga is 42 years old. She loves art so much that she puts it on her body through tattoos! She has 4 tattoos and will be getting a 5th one soon. Creating art makes her feel relaxed. In her free time she does pastel drawings and diamond paintings.



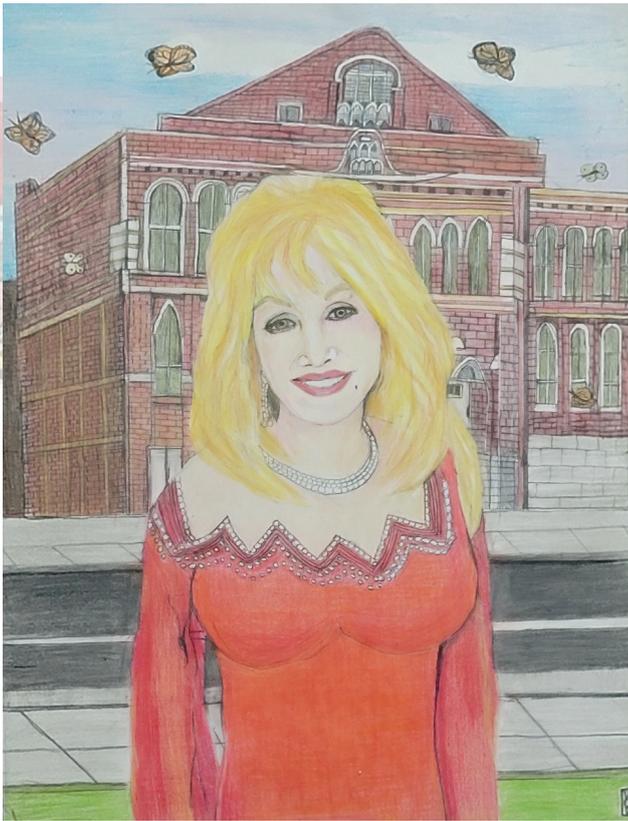
Photo of cat - Christy Earhart is a 2015 graduate of our Partners in Policymaking Leadership Institute and lives in Springfield, TN.



Clockwork Peacock - Hope McKee's artist statement: "As a disabled artist, my art has become my voice. I use a variety of colors and sweeping strokes to invoke feelings of joy and comfort, after all my name is Hope."



Words to Describe Me - Katie Moore is 27 years old and lives in Jackson, TN. She is a current scholar in our Partners in Policymaking Leadership Institute.



Dolly at the Ryman - David Duncan of Nashville loves to create. He says, "My opinion of art, personally speaking, is a thought made visually. Art is a better way of making a statement than verbal communication. Art transcends language."



Bee - Lauren Best works in textiles. Her works are layered with complex markings, patterns and a wide array of vivid color. Lauren's expressive pieces remind the viewer of stained-glass cathedrals or a vast cave filled with organically forming geometric crystals. She has recently shown work at Art Beat Gallery in Nashville.

Girl Power

Katie Hamilton

Being a woman is holding it together when everyone around me is in chaos, out of control, upset. Being a woman is finding the peace and comfort from Mother Earth and hearing the lullabies of Christmas. Girl Power is pure like the Lamb of God and fragile as the fallen snow. Girl Power is a labor of love, a process that requires bending and flexing and benefits the new Kingdom which brings out the colors of the rainbow. Girl Power is fulfilling a prophesy giving birth to new women, The Trinity, The Three Musketeers.

Being a woman is being flawless, strong, and not afraid to be weak. There are feelings inside of you that grow and turn you into a grown-up. Feedback is important. Sometimes "The Black Cloud" of stress comes around, causing you to not understand yourself, but what you need to do is find fun. When you feel frustrated or sad, you need to find fun, be playful, find beauty, and seek laughter. When danger controls, you need to think things through, process, and express how you really feel. When you do this, you feel different, prehistoric, winning the battle.

The days are passing by. I see the clouds moving and shifting and expanding into the life of your own making. Girl Power is when women hold one another together. Women need fitness on their spirits. Fruits of the spirit: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, gentleness, and self-control. Feeling beautiful like a swan full of the vibrations in sensitivity and love, grinding it together creating life. They deliver care, love, and beauty that will make you want to faint. Memories of the child who is an orphan of darkness who is lost and alone and who doesn't have any parents.

Isolation can turn you into your true self. When I see the face of someone else, I see my face. There is a lot of chemistry and history coming out of our minds, bodies, and spirits. I call this deep-sea diving, dancing around and around in the deep sea trying to find a place called home, a place of women, all who hold grace and internal beauty. The legacy of me, the world, of you, the faces are in the future, lost in time, in the darkness, who need forgiveness to heal. Healing your energy of the colors will flow out self-love and begin the chapters of your story as a woman, girl power.

Girls are shy and sensitive. They like respect for their privacy. A woman's personality is always ready to explode like a firecracker, bursting with colors, and making the most of it all. The sun is shining. Women are ready for the earthquakes found in the past, present, and future. Women are unstoppable. Women are strong, brave, and bold. Women have choices to decide their fate. They discover what they need to do to provide for themselves.

Katie Hamilton has been at Friends Life Community for the past 15 years creating out-of-this-world pieces. Her artwork, poetry, and short stories convey a variety of emotions and spirituality connecting elements of our world to the emotional realm. She has many passions and loves to connect with others deeply.

Beautiful Symmetry: A Story of Dance and Disability

By Jennifer James

When I think back to the earliest memories of my life, the art of dance has always been a part of the conversation. It has been 34 years since I first entered the dance world. I can almost feel the vibration of the music on the stage, feel the leather of the ballet shoes on my feet, or anticipate the rhythm and wondrous sound of my little tap shoes as they strum across the wooden floor beneath me. I am grateful for the opportunity to incorporate my background in dance and education into the work I do now.

I hold a Bachelor of Science in Liberal Arts from Middle Tennessee State University with a concentration in Dance Pedagogy and Practice and a focus in Inclusive Movement Strategies. In May of this year, I will also hold a Master of Arts from MTSU with a focus in Arts Education and Non-Profit Organizational Leadership. In addition to the 15+ years I trained as a professional dancer, I've had incredible opportunities to study abroad in Guatemala, participate in studies with the John F Kennedy Center and Axis Dance Company, perform a contemporary residency at The Frist Center, and many valuable choreographic and performing experiences as an MTSU Dance Company member. However, some of my most memorable experiences have been working with Borderless Arts TN.

I first got involved with Borderless Arts through my connection with MTSU Dance Theatre. My time as an undergraduate student in the dance department allowed me to combine my love for education and passion for dance. I wanted to explore more opportunities for dance communication and dance experiences among artists with disabilities. I was connected to Lori Kissinger, the director of Borderless Arts, in the fall of 2019. I began serving as the Borderless Arts dance intern in the spring of 2020 and the interim director for the new dance program.

As everything shifted towards going virtual in 2020, I used that time to build a foundation for our new dance program. The participants and I began meeting once a week via Zoom to dance and get to know each other. Even though we now have the opportunity to dance and perform at various events in person, we continue to meet and rehearse virtually. It is a fellowship I look forward to each week.

Some of the highlights of my time with Borderless Arts have included:

- The Beyond Space Dance Festival: I directed a piece for film where our dancers had the opportunity to perform at Adventure Science Center in Nashville. This project was in collaboration with the Space for Art Foundation, Humans to Mars Summit, Ray Boone videography, and composer M. Hebbe.
- I choreographed and facilitated the Dancing Beyond Borders International Dance Festival. This featured other community artists with disabilities as well as dance with an educational focus from China, Egypt, Greece, and Latin America.
- More recently, we participated in performances at Dance the World Disney, the TN State Museum, and The Grand Ole Opry.
- This summer, we have the opportunity to share our abilities in New York with Dance the World Broadway.

I look back on my time with Borderless Arts and the health challenges I have faced these past several years and can't help but find the beautiful symmetry in the way in which life connects us. I have been surrounded by a community of artists with disabilities who have some of the bravest and most resilient hearts I know. Recently, I've found myself becoming part of the disability community. Defining my own disability identity has been complex. I recently suffered a transient ischemic attack and was diagnosed with a neurological disorder that damages the protective covering of my nerves,





causing seizures, paralysis, and impaired movement. This has impacted the work I do with Borderless Arts in a remarkable way. Despite the unique challenges we have all faced, we have come together as a community stronger than I could have ever imagined. We are determined to share the art of dance within the beautiful spaces of our individual bodies. Having learned to create modified dance experiences for our artists, I am now learning to create those modifications within myself. Just as the participants have inspired me these past several years, I hope I can continue to teach them the value of their stories and the ability to share them, no matter what. This journey has been a story of courage, resilience, and the power of the arts.

I believe movement serves a purpose beyond the stage. I believe that the work of the dance community is not limited to the stage. Like dance, life is captured in moments, highlighted by beauty, yet often abandoned when discomfort sets in. A lot of the time, the struggles and challenges of life happen in the dark. With dance, there is an opportunity for these untold stories to be seen and heard. I would encourage anyone who is interested in participating in dance or witnessing a dance performance to not be nervous. Dance is a joyous art form that is meant to be experienced with a community.

This journey would not be possible without the amazing community, families, and support from the TN Arts Commission, the TN Council on Developmental Disabilities, South Arts, International Paper Company, John F Kennedy Center, and other arts organizations. I want to express my gratitude to Meronica Forrester Kent, the

younger sister of Borderless Arts dancer Bella, for her incredible leadership and bravery stepping in to lead at Dance the World Disney when I was unable to do so. She has been dancing since she was 3 years old and celebrated her 15th birthday while leading the Borderless Arts dance program for the Disney event.

I am thankful for the creative spaces in Middle Tennessee and beyond in which we can dance. Thank you to Pamela Sykes of GypsyLenz Photography for capturing many of our memorable moments, and to videographer Ray Boone and composer M. Hebbe.

Celebrating 20 Years of Borderless Arts TN

From Lori Kissinger, Executive Director: Borderless Arts TN celebrated our 20th anniversary in 2022. We continued to offer weekly programs in dance, music, and visual arts, as well as in-school residencies and special digital holiday celebrations. However, our celebration also included a variety of unique programs:

1. Meet the Masters Art Series and Exhibition
2. Presented a Horse Heritage piece of art to the Sumner County Commissioners
3. Art at the Airport
4. Created a Quilt Flag for the Veterans Center at MTSU
5. Commercial Art Project exposing our participants to commercial work
6. Created a piece of art based on the Antikythera Mechanism, which was presented to Greece
7. Water Warriors
8. Special history art visual art and performances at the Tennessee State Museum
9. Special performances held at the Grand Ole Opry House
10. Digital art project with the Guggenheim Museum
11. Digital art project and presentation to the United Nations
12. First dance group of all dancers with disabilities to perform at Disney World
13. Created a piece of art for the MOTE Marine Institute that was sent into the ocean
14. Created a jersey for the Nashville Sounds
15. Presented a special piece of art to Sun Records
16. Participated in the Nashville Predators Score and Win Program
17. Coordinated the "Bee Creative" project in which participants learned about bees and made art from bee products from a variety of workshops
18. Hosted our first play based off an original story
19. Started offering drum circle activities
20. Offered mentoring in cartooning and writing for participants



Nature Calls - Susan Turner of Ooltewah is 51 years old. She is proud to have worked as a bagger at Food City for 16 years. In her free time, she likes to paint handmade cards and spend time at her family's lake house.



Displacement - Priscilla Doran is a photographer from Hixson, TN. She has a passion for storytelling through photography and loves math and creative writing.



Untitled - David Buback of Jackson was a Project SEARCH intern in 2018-2019 and now works at Jackson-Madison County General Hospital. He loves coffee, people, games, and creating art focused on mental illness and Jesus.



Billy Ray Cyrus - Adopted with her twin sister from Sierra Leone, Africa, Hope Dyson now lives in the Nashville area. She struggled as a kid with Autism Spectrum Disorder, Epilepsy, and expressing her emotions. Now, as an artist, athlete, and through serving other people, she loves to bring joy to others. In her painting practice she focuses on portraits of celebrities. She has recently shown work at Art Beat Gallery in Nashville.



Butterfly - Alyssa Ray has been interested in art all of her life. She has enjoyed participating with AbleVoices and Borderless Arts TN for several years. Alyssa took this photo of a butterfly at Liberty Grace Farms in Columbia, TN in the summer of 2022.

The Fantastic Jimmy Miller

Jimmy Miller

Scene 1: Friends Life University

Professor Jimmy: Next week, we are going to take a trip to the science museum to learn about the planets in our solar system. Make sure to have your permission slips signed by your parents. Class dismissed!

I am so excited to have this teaching job. I love sharing my experiences with my class. I sure am hungry, but first I need to grade everyone's math papers.

SFX: City alarm

Professor Jimmy: (Looks up towards signal) There's my signal! These math papers are going to have to be put on hold. I've got to save my city!

(Professor Jimmy goes behind his desk. With a blast of smoke and lights, Professor Jimmy transforms into The Fantastic Jimmy Miller. The Fantastic Jimmy theme song plays and a magic carpet suddenly flies into the classroom. Fantastic Jimmy hops on magic carpet and flies away.)

Scene 2: Downtown Peachville

(FJ floats in on his magic carpet as a tornado comes onto the stage.)

Fantastic Jimmy: Back off, you silly twister! My laser vision is about to destroy you! (FJ uses laser vision to zap tornado.) I am powerful and strong!

Scene 3: Downtown Peachville

Citizen: Oh, no, that building has burst into flames! If only The Fantastic Jimmy were here to help us...

Fantastic Jimmy: I am coming to help. I am on my way! Stand back, citizen! This flaming inferno is no match for The Fantastic Jimmy Miller. (Fantastic Jimmy blows out fire.)

Citizen: You're my hero!

Fantastic Jimmy: Just doing my job!

Shark (J. Rob): Oh, Fantastic Jimmy, help me please!

Fantastic Jimmy: Oh, no, a baby shark needs my help! Magic Carpet, take me to the Peachville Ocean!

Scene 4: Shore of Peachville Ocean

(Fantastic Jimmy sees a baby shark lying on the beach.)

Fantastic Jimmy: Hey, Baby Shark, are you running low on oxygen?

Baby Shark (J. Rob): Yes.

Fantastic Jimmy: I'll push you gently into the ocean with my super human strength! (Fantastic Jimmy pushes Baby Shark back into water.)

Baby Shark (J. Rob): Thank you!

Fantastic Jimmy: Stay away from fishermen and stay in school! Whew - It's been an exhausting evening...

SFX: Cat meowing

Fantastic Jimmy: *Oh, no!* That sounds like a worried cat! I'm on my way, my furry friend!

Scene 5: Peachville Park w/ large tree

Worried Cat: Fantastic Jimmy, I am stuck in a tree. Meow!

Fantastic Jimmy: It's okay, kitty, just stay there. I'm not going to let you fall! I'm coming up! (Fantastic Jimmy uses Magic Carpet to help Worried Cat out of the tree.) I've got you!

Worried Cat: (licks The Fantastic Jimmy) Thank you, Fantastic Jimmy. You're my hero meow!

Fantastic Jimmy: Oh, it was nothing really. I just love saving everybody! Boy - I am tired and hungry. Magic Carpet, take me home!

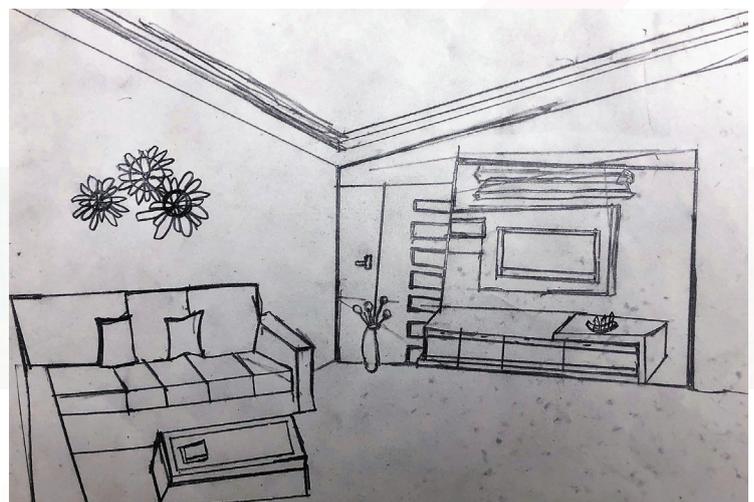
Scene 6: Friends Life University

Professor Jimmy: (eating mushroom pizza) Whew, what a day! Never fear, The Fantastic Jimmy Miller is always here!

Jimmy Miller loves comedy, puppetry, performing, and making others feel joyful! He really knows how to think outside the box and offers high creativity with every project he is involved in.



Holding On To Letting Go - Marta Hernandez-Fontenot of Memphis says, "I feel like the world stops when I am creating art in my craft room."



The Living Room - Cameron Copeland of Chattanooga is a 25-year-old man with Alexander's Disease who is active in advocating for himself and others with this diagnosis. His favorite hobbies are architectural drawing and archery. Cameron likes to bless his friends and family with gifts of artwork.

Leadership through the Arts: The Council's Scholarship Fund

One of our Council's main goals is "developing engaged leaders" in Tennessee's disability community. Our Scholarship Fund falls under this goal. People with disabilities and their families can apply to use our Scholarship Fund for disability-related learning or leadership opportunities. We believe participation in the arts is a powerful way for people with disabilities to grow their confidence and power of self-expression – key leadership skills!

We asked two Scholarship Fund recipients to share their experiences with arts-based learning, and what these opportunities have meant to them and their families.

Josecarlos Fumero – Dream with Me Performing Arts workshop, from a Self-Advocate's Perspective

I am 21 years old, and I have autism. I was diagnosed at 5 years old. I moved to Nashville in 2020 and currently live with my family in Mt. Juliet. My favorite hobbies are art, writing short stories, acting, movies, dinosaurs, manga, and Godzilla.

My mom and I gave ourselves the task of looking for some workshops that interest me. That's how we discovered the "Dream with Me" program. They offered sketch comedy, and I like it a lot. My mom contacted Debbie (who runs the program). By May 2022, I started the workshop.

I got to know more people and make friends. Debbie is an excellent and lovely teacher. I have had the opportunity to participate in comedy sketches, play different characters, produce a sketch, and contribute ideas. Most importantly, my family was able to see the activities we did for Halloween and Christmas.

What I liked the most was:

- having the opportunity to meet more people
- that it is an online platform
- expanding my knowledge of sketch, comedy, and production techniques
- and working with Debbie.

In general, I think I did very well. Debbie made us feel very comfortable and confident. Acting shyness is common when one is new, but I was able to overcome it.

The workshop helped me a lot. I never imagined enjoying this opportunity so much.

We finished the workshop in December. I would like to find more workshops related to the subject of art because other branches of art that are my hobbies are



Josecarlos Fumero

drawing and writing short stories of science fiction and horror. I would really like to find another workshop, but it is super difficult to find this type of activity for special people like me.

Participating in these kinds of arts workshops is a unique experience that you can enjoy with your family. It helps you develop other skills and talents.

Ify Agholor - Backlight Productions: Apprenticeships in the Art Industry, from a Parent's Perspective

Being a parent to kids on the autism spectrum (I have a boy and a girl now approaching adulthood) can be overwhelming at times. But it's also joyful to be raising individuals who have all sorts of hidden talents and gifts. One of the difficulties one encounters as they approach adulthood is finding programs that are age appropriate, engaging, and creative enough to sustain their interest



Backlight Productions Executive Director Melissa Smith and Danielle Agholor discussing and sketching costumes

over time. So many of the available programs are for young children with disabilities. This is where “Backlight Productions’ Apprenticeship in the Art Industry” program fills the void.

I was not sure what to expect when I enrolled my daughter in the program, but she thrived. She actively participated in discussing the various aspects of stage production and behind the scenes elements. She learned about props design, costumes, staging, sketching, set design, character development, and directing. My daughter shared her opinion and put her ideas into action. I talked with Melissa Smith, the executive director of the program. Melissa teaches various aspects of theatre production and backstage work to help people discover their strengths and talents. That includes:

- set design
- props
- music cues
- staging
- lighting
- wardrobe

Melissa believes there are many career opportunities for people, including those with disabilities, in supporting stage performances. She coaches all the participants and encourages them to share their opinions. She sees



Danielle Agholor play headshot

each person’s individual strengths and supports them to work together as a group during live stage performances. Melissa shared that she enjoys seeing how excited participants are when their ideas are used in a stage production. My daughter was very happy to be a part of this great program.

This a pilot program, and Melissa hopes to turn this into a certification program to help prepare people for job opportunities in the arts industry and theatre.

My perspective as parent: I am glad that my kid found an avenue to express herself, exchange ideas with her peers, and be actively engaged. This provided her an opportunity to discover new strengths and talents within herself. She learned she had the ability to coordinate costumes, sketch, color match, and work as a stagehand. These were strengths we never knew existed but were unlocked during this program. We look forward to more opportunities and we are grateful to Tennessee Council on Developmental Disabilities for the support to experience this program.



Danielle Agholor in costume

Learn more at www.tn.gov/cdd/engage-with-us/scholarship-fund.html.

Princess Kate Kate Johnson

Scene 1

Narrator (Heather): Once upon a time, there was a joyful Princess named Kate. She lived in the kingdom of Bellevue. When she wasn't painting beautiful portraits or adding to her extensive sticker collection, she spent her days watching her favorite movie "Ella Enchanted" at the Royal Cinema with her handsome husband, Prince Eric. (Audience sees Kate and Eric going into movie theatre ordering their favorite snacks.)

Kate: We'll have some popcorn and gummy bears, please! (Audience sees Kate and Eric sit down in the movie theatre. Kate shares her snacks with Eric, he is happy and grateful.)

Kate: This is going to be a great movie, Prince Eric! (Audience sees "The End" on movie screen.)

Kate: (Excitedly) Oh my gosh, I loved it!

Eric: (Excitedly) Me, too! Thank you for taking me to this wonderful movie, Princess Kate!

Scene 2

Narrator: Princess Kate was known throughout the kingdom of Bellevue for being an excellent spinner. Every Friday evening, she would share her talents with the lords and ladies of Bellevue (Audience sees Kate backstage.)

Kate: Spinning is FUN! (Audience sees Kate spinning on stage and hears musical, magical melody while she spins. The audience sees Kate bow. Kate blows kisses to the audience.) Thank you for watching me spin! I LOVE you all!

Scene 3

Narrator: Princess Kate loved spending time with her mother, the Queen Mom. On sunny afternoons, they would travel to Paris, France and gaze upon the Eiffel Tower. They would often spend their time walking dogs. (Audience sees Kate and Mom walking by Eiffel Tower)

Kate: It's so pretty! (Audience sees Kate and Mom with dogs). Mom, I really like walking the dogs with you! (Audience sees Kate and Mom hugging)

Mother: You will be my sunshine. Don't you ever forget it.

Scene 4

Narrator: One of Princess Kate's favorite places to fill her belly was the Café Ginnie.

Kate: (Audience sees Kate ordering her meal.) I'll have a tuna fish sandwich with a slice of carrot cake and apple juice, please. (Audience sees Kate eating carrot cake.) Yum! (Audience sees Kate wiping her mouth with napkin.) Delicious!

Scene 5

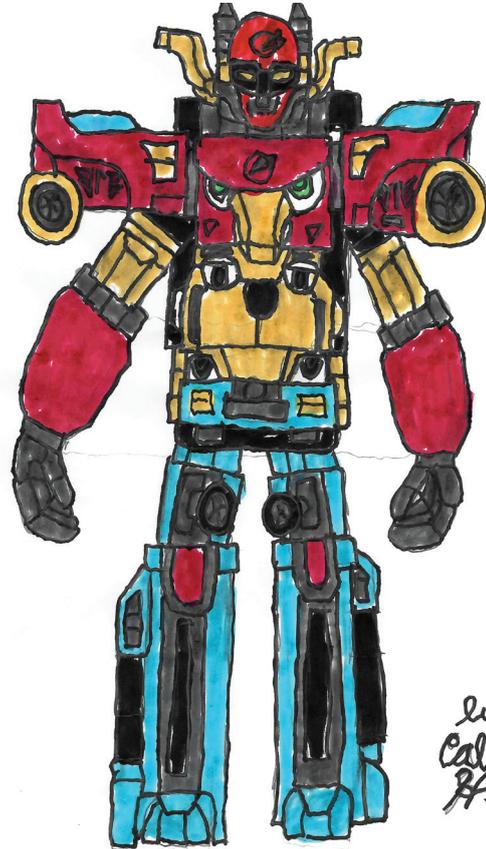
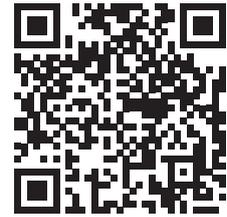
Narrator: Princess Kate loved living in her kingdom. She was so **thankful** for the wonderful days she was able to spend with her family and friends. Before going to bed each night, Princess Kate would say her prayers and remind herself that...

Kate: I am grateful for going on adventures with the people that I love.

THE END

Kate Johnson is a huge fan of Taylor Swift, her family, and all things colorful! She has a wild imagination that creates whimsical products. She loves a good dance party and really knows how to have a good time!

SCAN HERE FOR AN
ENACTMENT OF
PRINCESS KATE BY
KATE JOHNSON



Power Rangers RPM Megazord - Calvin Hall is 47 years old, lives in Oak Ridge, and loves art. He can typically draw anything he looks at, including people. He enjoys watching Power Rangers and drawing characters from the show to relax and feel calm.



The Old Barn - Jacob Atkins of Chattanooga is 23 years old and a talented cartoon artist. In his free time, he likes to play video games and mini golf.



The Trio - Nicholas Coakley is a photographer with the AbleVoices program and enjoys taking pictures of his cows.



My Portrait - Teresa Holmes of Signal Mountain is 23 years old. She recently graduated from high school and now attends Trousdale School. Teresa loves mermaids and is proud of being smart at math.



Mystic Lands - Anthony Bledsoe is 21 years old, lives in Kingsport, and has autism. He enjoys making art and writing poems.



Falling Roses - Jessica Sierra of Ooltewah is 27 years old and loves to paint. Her favorite color is pink. Some of her favorite things to do in her free time are play basketball in the Trousdale School basketball tournament, watch TikTok videos, and have her nails done.

Unashamed

Tyler Samuel

*Don't assume the heart
We know not the love within
Don't assume the heart
Love is often slow...
Like a leak in a dam break...
Love is often slow...
Try not to fear love
It is ok to love more!
Try not to block love!
Love is often quick
Like a trip and fall we dive...
Love is often quick
Let love into you
Share love with the world and you
Let love into us*

4-28-22 #unashamed

Tyler Samuel, a Nashville local since 1998, is a classically trained soprano who studied at the University of Evansville, attaining a Bachelor of Music in vocal performance. She is a disability rights advocate and is legally blind and hard of hearing.



Designed with Me in Mind: Art that Includes Everyone

What does true inclusion look like? What does it feel like?

Our Council hears a common theme from people with disabilities and their family members. They often share some version of: “It means so much to enter a public place and know that our needs were considered. We’re used to having to work around things. We’re used to making do. It’s easy to tell when something was actually designed with us in mind.” Those of us who live the disability experience often see the word “inclusive” used to mean “disability-specific.” But inclusion in the fullest meaning of the word is when all members of a community can participate together. True inclusion brings us together to share an experience. It fully incorporates our differences while uniting us in what we share.

The organizations we’re featuring in this section of *Breaking Ground* understand inclusion. These are major arts centers that are planning for the experiences of people with disabilities in programming for the full community. They went beyond checking a box or doing the minimum. They asked: “How can we make sure that people with disabilities can fully participate in what we’re offering? What barriers can we remove? How can we make this easy and fun for everyone?”

We applaud this approach. After all: where better for inclusion to be the norm than the arts, where we explore the endless variety of what it means to be human?

Nashville Children’s Theatre: Every Child Belongs Here

Every child belongs here. This belief is central to the vision of Nashville Children’s Theatre (NCT). NCT understands that some families hesitate to bring their family members to live theatre without knowing how they will react or if they will be accepted. Through collaboration with community partners, NCT has worked to create a

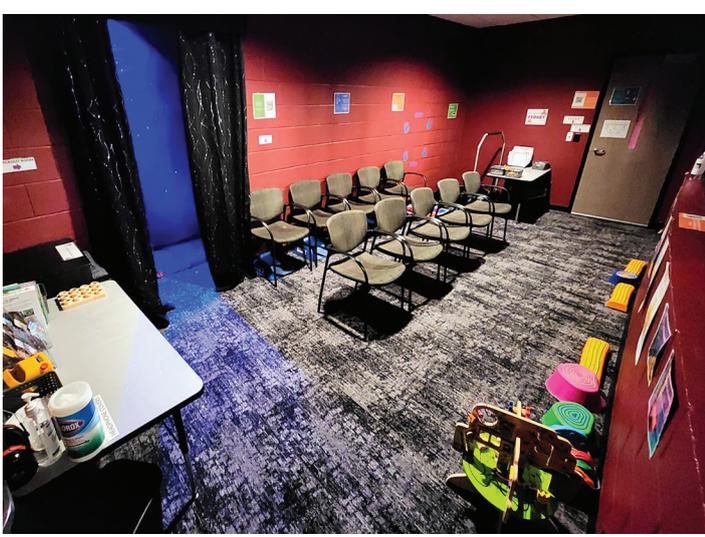
welcoming, accessible, and inclusive space for all young people and their families in Middle Tennessee. NCT continues to learn and grow its inclusion practices, such as:

- Social stories to help prepare children – especially those who are neurodivergent – for their NCT experience.
- Assistive listening devices for amplified, live sound feed of productions.
- Accommodations for mobility and physical disabilities.
- Set American Sign Language performances.
- Inclusion training for all education staff.

(To learn more about The NCT Drama School’s teaching philosophy and inclusion tools; [https://nashvillechildrenstheatre.org/teaching-philosophy/.](https://nashvillechildrenstheatre.org/teaching-philosophy/))



Child watches a recent NCT production from the Sensory Room



New Sensory Room funded by the Tennessee Arts Commission

NCT's brand-new **Sensory Room**, funded by the Tennessee Arts Commission, is located at the back of NCT's main auditorium. The room allows patrons to see and hear the performance while accessing tools to help self-regulate. This room ensures that all performances at NCT are sensory friendly. It also provides a space for students in the NCT Drama School to regulate their minds and bodies as needed. Tools include:

- weighted blankets;
- a blackout room with soothing lights;
- dials to adjust sound and light levels for enjoying the performance;
- tactile sensory pads;
- an adult-graded trampoline;
- and much more.

(For the full list, visit <https://nashvillechildrenstheatre.org/edi-policies/>).



NCT also offers **Neuro-Inclusive Performances**, which are designed to be a safe and accepting environment where patrons with disabilities or sensory sensitivities are free to speak and move in reaction to the story being told onstage. During the performance, a sensory guide will raise a glow wand when something abrupt is about to occur. NCT offers a discounted rate to the disability community for Neuro-Inclusive Performances. In addition, free "Try It Again" passes are available for patrons who may need to reschedule to a different performance date of the same show. (To sign up for more information on Neuro-Inclusive Performances at NCT and to access the discount, visit <https://bit.ly/NCTInfo>).

NCT continues to hear from the schools and families about the positive impact of its accessibility and inclusion supports. One recent NCT patron told us:

"Last week, my son's kindergarten class came to the theater for a field trip. I was a little nervous about it because my son has autism. Sitting still, large crowds, and noise very easily overwhelm and overstimulate him. A few days prior to the trip, I started looking at your website and was blown away. Not only was there a Sensory Room, there was also a detailed social story so we could prepare for the day! I honestly started to tear up a little because you have no idea how much these mean to families like mine. Without these accommodations, my child would not have been able to enjoy the play. I guarantee we would have been either pacing the lobby or sitting in our car. Instead, we got to spend the morning with several other children from other schools in the Sensory Room. They all laughed, played, danced, and enjoyed the show. It was beautiful. Thank you, thank you, thank you for being inclusive and amazing. We will definitely be back, and I will definitely be telling everyone I know about our wonderful experience."

As NCT continues to grow its inclusive programming, the organization hopes to reach more families in Middle Tennessee and to make sure every child feels welcomed, seen, heard, and celebrated. NCT aims to be a safe and brave space for everyone in the community to flourish.

NCT is a founding member of The All-Access Inclusion Network (AAIN), a community network of arts, education, athletic, and entertainment organizations led by the Vanderbilt Kennedy Center's Treatment and Research Institute on Autism Spectrum Disorders (TRIAD). The network is focused on true inclusion for neurodivergent individuals: creating meaningful experiences and opportunities to belong through participation in programs and representation within organizations. The network works together to create supports, provide staff training, and recommend research-based best practices for inclusion.

For more information, please visit <https://nashvillechildrenstheatre.org/edi-policies/> or <https://vkc.vumc.org/vkc/triad/cei-AAIN/>

Rachael Jenkins is an Educational Consultant with the Treatment and Research Institute on Autism Spectrum Disorders (TRIAD). Rachael has been part of the All-Access Inclusion Network [AAIN] since 2021.

Colin Peterson, NCT Education Director, has worked with youth of all ages and devised, scripted, and created curriculum to support student growth and instill empathy for over 25 years.

Community Collaboration is Key to the Frist Art Museum's Accessibility

From the very first conversations about opening a visual arts center in downtown Nashville in the mid-90s, the Frist's founders were focused on making the institution a cultural hub that would be accessible to everyone. The mission and vision was to:

- bring to Middle Tennessee the greatest art in the world,
- be a place of education and inspiration,
- to inspire people through art to look at their world in new ways,
- and most importantly, to be welcoming to all.

As the architects began to renovate the historic building—Nashville's former main post office—one of the first calls was to the Tennessee Disability Coalition.

At the other end of the line was Donna DeStefano, who immediately accepted the request for assistance in meeting the needs of guests with a variety of disabilities. Representatives from other disability groups joined the effort, including:

- the late Floyd Stewart and Sofia Maneschi of the Center for Independent Living of Middle Tennessee (now Empower Tennessee)
- The League of Deaf and Hard of Hearing (now Bridges for the Deaf and Hard of Hearing)
- Easter Seals
- Four-by-Two Guide Dog Users of Middle TN
- Tennessee Council on Developmental Disabilities

These groups together designed a training program to educate the Frist staff and volunteers in how to accommodate people of all abilities. The heart of the program: Weave accessibility seamlessly into the operation of the museum and into the consciousness of every team member. Training of staff and volunteers began prior to the museum's opening and continues to this day.

Physical accessibility was top of mind during the renovation. DeStefano's ad-hoc advisory team made many on-site walkthrough visits over the years. They provided consultation about ramps, accessible parking, digital accessibility, wheelchairs, and walkers.

But of equal importance was an emphasis on other forms of accessibility related to age, socio-economic status, emotional sensitivity, cultural background, and intellectual function. The Frist offers programs designed for specific groups, such as "Making Memories: A Dementia Social Engagement Program," presented in partnership with the Alzheimer's Association, Tennessee Chapter. The Frist staff also makes it a regular practice to think critically about ways to present art and programs in an accessible way for whoever may enter the building on any given day.

During exhibition launch meetings, common topics for discussion include:

- in-gallery seating options,
- high-contrast and large-type materials,
- spaces for reflection,
- multisensory carts,
- and when appropriate, the assembly of community advisors to assist with culturally sensitive interpretation and programs.





For more than 20 years, Bridges, Empower Tennessee, the Tennessee Disability Coalition, and the Nashville Public Library have helped the Frist with communication aids such as:

- ASL interpretation services,
- assistive listening devices,
- Braille materials,
- and testing the Frist's new website in 2020.

The Frist's communications department relies on Alicia Searcy, fashion blogger and co-founder and executive director of the nonprofit Fashion is for Every Body, for critical feedback and informal consultation. Searcy and her husband, Clint, are featured in a video on the accessibility page of museum's website. Alicia also sits on the museum's marketing council, where she provides vital perspectives, innovative ideas, and promotional support.

In 2019, the Frist was the recipient of Empower Tennessee's first Access Music City Business Champion Award. While such awards are deeply appreciated, the Frist staff understands that with ever-changing technology, construction practices, and awareness levels, the work toward making their museum more accessible is perpetual. It is an opportunity they enthusiastically embrace. Learn more about the Accessibility at the Frist at [FristArt-Museum.org/Accessibility](https://www.fristartmuseum.org/Accessibility).

See how the Frist expands how visitors experience art through its multisensory carts: <https://bit.ly/FristCarts>

Museums for All Program Increases Economic Accessibility

The Frist and 7 other Tennessee museums participate in Museums for All. Museums for All is a national program that offers free or reduced admission for those receiving food assistance.

The program is designed to make people of all backgrounds feel welcome at cultural institutions and encourage them to visit regularly.

Guests simply need to present their SNAP EBT card (Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program Electronic Benefit Transfer) to gain access to more than 1,000 museums throughout the United States. At the Frist, each EBT card admits four adults at a cost of \$3 per person. (Guests 18 and under are always admitted free of charge.) Tennessee's participating museums are:

- **Adventure Science Center**
(Nashville, TN)
- **Amuse'um Children's Museum**
(Columbia, TN)
- **The Blues Foundation's Blues Hall of Fame Museum**
(Memphis, TN)
- **Children's Museum of Oak Ridge**
(Oak Ridge, TN)
- **Creative Discovery Museum**
(Chattanooga, TN)
- **Customs House Museum & Cultural Center**
(Clarksville, TN)
- **Frist Art Museum**
(Nashville, TN)
- **Hunter Museum of American Art**
(Chattanooga, TN)

Find a complete national list of participating organizations at museums4all.org.

ACCESSIBILITY
AND MULTISEN-
SORY CARTS AT
THE FRIST ART
MUSEUM



Tennessee Council on Developmental Disabilities

Davy Crockett Tower, 1st Floor
500 James Robertson Parkway
Nashville, TN 37243
Return service requested

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NASHVILLE, TN
PERMIT NO. 983



Connections - Pink, Purple, Yellow, Green I and II diptych - Grace walker Goad began painting at age four, a year after she was diagnosed with moderately severe autism, speech/language disorder, and intellectual disability in 1997. Her advanced use of color and composition garnered media attention before age 10. Since then, she has been featured by many prominent national media outlets, including ABC's "The View" and "The New York Times." Her art is in the Tennessee Arts Commission's permanent artists' collection at the Tennessee State Museum. Her works have been exhibited and are in private collections all across the U.S. Grace lives in Nashville and can be located online on Facebook and Instagram as Grace Goad Autism Art.



Council on
Developmental Disabilities

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