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Art for joy's sake

Disabled discover new ways to express themselves

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Sean Guinivan of Wilmington laughs as he paints Saturday with help from UD senior Alison Del Duca (center) and Robin Ferranto of Wilmington at Artfest 2009 in Newport.

UD senior Alison Del Duca steadies the hand of Sean Guinivan as he paints Saturday at Artfest 2009 in Newport.

When Haley Shiber has a paintbrush in her hand, something wonderful happens.

The 12-year-old Smyrna girl has a progressive neuromuscular disease that requires her to use a wheelchair for mobility and a speech-assist computer to communicate with others.

But when she paints, she doesn't need words to express her feelings. Her big smile says it all.

"It's just wonderful because Lisa puts her all into whatever she does," said her mother, Debbie Shiber. "Haley has created such beautiful art."

The Shibers, including dad Howard, joined about 20 other families in Newport Saturday for Artfest 2009, a morning of therapeutic drawing, painting and stenciling designed to let children and adults with disabilities discover a form of self-expression that has no rules and no boundaries.

Now in its third year, the two-hour workshop is a partnership of the University of Delaware's Center for Disabilities Studies and Lisa Bartoli, founder of the nonprofit Art Therapy Express Program. The participants' artwork will become part of the center's annual report, which is published in the form of a colorful wall calendar.

"The goal is to give people with disabilities the same opportunities that everyone else has," said Michele Sands, communications specialist at UD. "This is an opportunity for them maybe to do something they haven't done before."

Bartoli believes in the power of art for her students.

"It's a form of communication for people who sometimes have trouble expressing themselves," she said. "To me, it's like hitting a home run."

And there's no right or wrong way to do it, she said. If her students don't have the fine motor skills to wield a paintbrush, she has assistive devices that can help. Haley uses a deltoid assist -- a sort of sling -- to steady her arm so she can paint.

If that doesn't work, Bartoli encourages her students to create pictures using their palms or feet.

"Take a look at the joy," she said, scanning the room. "A lot of these students don't have the [team] sports they can participate in, so this is their chance to succeed and to socialize, to be together like anyone else."

Debbie Shiber said Haley spends so much time around adults -- doctors, teachers and therapists -- that she doesn't often play with kids her own age. But on Saturday, Haley was hanging with pal Shayla Bartoli, 10.

"I think it makes her happier and she just loves to do it," said Shayla, who is Lisa Bartoli's daughter. "I love to see her face. I think everybody can do art."

Sean Guinivan, 22, took art in high school but hasn't had much chance to practice his skills since graduation.

That's why his parents, Rich and Phyllis Guinivan, brought him to the workshop Saturday.

Rich said his son, who has cerebral palsy, has an active mind but physical barriers to self-expression. His speech is limited. His artwork is not.

"He enjoys working with people and doing something expressive with his hands and seeing things emerge," Phyllis said.

Terri Hancharick brought her disabled daughter, 22-year-old Brigitte, to the workshop because "she loves getting her hands in the paint."

"People don't realize that little tray on her wheelchair is her world," Hancharick said. "Unless you bring things to her, she won't experience them. Art helps to open up that world."

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www.arttherapyexpress.org

www.udel.edu/cds
