



◀ **Children in Olive Branch, Mississippi, learn to make baskets in a workshop led by a DeSoto Arts Council artist as part of DeSoto County's Art for Autism program.**

A Welcoming Oasis

More and more museums are working with educators, trainers, guards, and specialized docents to create programs for autistic children and their families

BY GAIL GREGG

Last summer, thanks to an innovative new program at the Dallas Museum of Art, nine-year-old Dennis Schultze achieved an important milestone in his life, one that comes easily to most children his age: he went to day camp. “This is the first place I’ve ever been able to drop him off,” says his mother, Rachel Schultze. “The teachers know the language of autism.”

Dennis has benefited from a relatively new and growing effort by the nation’s art museums to embrace children with autism. The programs they offer typically combine studio work with enjoying museum treasures. Often the entire family is welcome to share the experience. “The fit is perfect, because art gives the students a universal form of communication,” says Elizabeth Kerns, director of education at the Museum of Contemporary Art in Jacksonville, Florida.

Autistic children are sometimes disruptive and difficult to handle—and may elicit hostility from uncomprehending visitors. But if museums open their doors early just for them, the children and their families can relax and enjoy the experience of being around art. “Disabled children can be loud or have a meltdown,” says Laura Lynch, director of education at the Nassau County Museum of Art in Roslyn Harbor, New

York. “It’s really comforting when you can create a safe place where this is allowed.”

For art museums, establishing a welcoming environment takes a concerted effort. Many museums hire specialists in autistic spectrum disorder (ASD) to aid in developing curricula and teaching staff educators about the condition. Local autism advocacy groups will often help pilot the new programs and later find participants. Organizations such as Museum Access Consortium in the greater New York area facilitate conferences and panel discussions and assist educators in exchanging information and ideas.

“We do a lot of sharing of information,” says Michelle López, senior coordinator of ArtAccess, a program at the Queens Museum of Art in New York. “We’re all connected.” In Boston, for example, the Museum of Fine Arts, the Museum of Science, and the Boston Children’s Museum were recently awarded a joint grant to improve access for people on the autism spectrum. Trainers from the Massachusetts chapter of the Autism Society met with educators from all three institutions to help them plan their new programs, and the educators continue to work together.

At the Nassau County museum, accessibility consultant Pearl Rosen helped design a training session and manual for its Autism & the Arts volunteers, who are often teenagers from area high schools fulfilling their community-service requirements. “Sit with the group, talk about your ideas, choices, things you notice,” her manual counsels. “Give compliments, ask opinions, demonstrate being polite and caring. . . . You will be modeling appropriate normal interaction.”

Working with ASD children requires special preparation. Parents are often



◀ A child explores a dollhouse in the Boston Children's Museum, which is working to improve access for people on the autism spectrum.

offered “social story” sheets to read with their children in advance of a visit. These use simple pictures that explain the experience, from walking in the front door to encountering guards to looking at sculpture to making work in the studio. “There will be lots of people here,” reads part of the Dallas Museum’s social story. “I can touch and feel things in the Young Learners Gallery.”

Most museums report an enthusiastic response to programming for autistic children. “We tried this as an experiment,” Dallas access-program manager Amanda Blake says of her original Autism Awareness Family Celebration, in 2009. “I really had no idea how successful it would be.” Enrollment was limited to 250 for that first event, she reports, “but we had 300 people on a waiting list.” Blake now enrolls 500 for the quarterly gatherings. The museum also offers a summer day camp.

In Jacksonville, MOCA has elected to work directly with schoolchildren and their classroom teachers, paraprofessionals, and occupational and speech therapists. Twelve schools have cycled through the museum’s Rainbow Artists program since its inception, in 2008, serving 35 to 40 students each year. A key part of the initiative is encouraging teachers to take the art-making experiences they observe at the museum back

into their own classrooms. “We don’t have an official teacher training program yet, but that would be a natural progression,” says Kerns.

As many museums report, teachers are often surprised at the level of social interaction art programs elicit from their students—and at the level of work the students are capable of. “Children with autism spend their school days learning to be as ‘typical’ as possible,” writes consultant Lisa Jo Rudy in her article “Full Spectrum: Addressing the Needs of Kids with Autism” in *Museum* magazine. “Museums, though, are about passions and unique abilities.”

A number of institutions, such as the Metropolitan Museum of Art and the Museum of Modern Art in New York, have opted not to offer specific programming for ASD children, but to include them in “all access” sessions for the developmentally disabled. They also design tours and events for groups of students from special schools or residential group homes.

Many museum art programs culminate in celebrations during Autism Awareness Month, every April, established several years ago by the United Nations to “shine a bright light on autism as a growing global health crisis.” These festivals, often organized around an exhibi-

tion, “send a message to others about how autistic children see the world,” says Jacksonville-based disabilities specialist Mae Barker. The Cummer Museum of Art & Gardens in Jacksonville hosts more than 2,000 children with a range of disabilities at its four-day festival every spring. In Hernando, Mississippi, the DeSoto Arts Council will hold its third annual Autism Awareness celebration on April 15. With the autism advocacy organization the BOLD Initiative, the Mississippi Arts Commission, and the DeSoto Board of Supervisors as sponsors, the Arts Council convened weekend art classes in March for ASD children and helped train teenage volunteers to work with younger students. Local artists led workshops, including fiber artist Patricia Holmberg, who brought in wool from her own animals and taught students to felt.

The classes conclude with a county-wide open studio and festival that DeSoto Arts Council executive director Vicky Neyman says is designed “to show the world what these kids are capable of.” She says that young artists enjoy standing by their work and explaining it to visitors. “We’ve found children being conversational who usually don’t say much.” News of the classes spread quickly after the first season. “The first year, we struggled to get ten kids into the program. This year we have 60.”

Back in Dallas, Dennis Schultze and his mother have become more frequent visitors to the museum since his positive experiences at last summer’s day camp and in quarterly workshops.

Dennis is so comfortable in the building, his mother says, that “he now wants to wave at all the guards, because he thinks he knows them.” ■

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