

*2015/2016 Annual Arts Issue*

# BREAKING

G R O U N D



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

## Trill

— by Kathy Tupper

## Taste Me

*You tickle my strings  
and the utterless  
trill  
of that sun-dappled song  
flutters  
into the honeysuckle river  
flowing  
deep in the silver sky  
like liquid gold*

— by Kathy Tupper



### KATHY TUPPER

*fills her life with colorful art each day. She has explored different artistic techniques for her pictures to convey her curiosity about places, nature and people, and to create a vision of hope and happiness.*

## COVER ART

### Respect the Disabled Please

— by Yvonne Bartholomew-Thomas

#### YVONNE BARTHOLOMEW-THOMAS

*Only six months after moving from West Tennessee to East Tennessee, Yvonne Bartholomew-Thomas's husband had a massive stroke which caused hemi-paralysis, aphasia and other disabilities. The experience of his disability and being his caregiver influenced the subject matter for her oil painting.*



Learn more about the TN Council on Developmental Disabilities - 615.532-6615; [www.tn.gov/cdd](http://www.tn.gov/cdd); [www.facebook.com/TNCouncilonDD](http://www.facebook.com/TNCouncilonDD); [Tnddc@tn.gov](mailto:Tnddc@tn.gov). Subscriptions to Breaking Ground are free and available through the Council office. Contact us by phone or email with subscription updates or requests, and please include name and mailing or email address.

## A Letter From the Executive Director, Tennessee Council on Developmental Disabilities



The Tennessee Council on Developmental Disabilities is delighted to present this year's collection of exceptional art created by Tennesseans with disabilities. Each year in our arts issue of *Breaking Ground* magazine, we feature poetry, prose, photography, and other types of visual art made by, or about, people with disabilities and highlight community programs that provide individuals with disabilities access to the arts.

The Council recognizes that the arts are an important pathway to employment for many individuals with disabilities. We recently sponsored a webinar series through VSA Tennessee about creating careers in the arts for artists with disabilities ("A Guide to Career Development for Visual and Performing Artists with Disabilities" webinars, available at [vsatn.org/webinars-slideshow-presentation](http://vsatn.org/webinars-slideshow-presentation)).

We also know the arts are an avenue for all of us to express ourselves and connect to others. Many articles in this issue feature programs that provide opportunities for individuals with disabilities to showcase their talent and creativity and form relationships with other community members. As our partners at the Tennessee Arts Commission mention below, we recently helped develop a guide to help community arts venues include more individuals with disabilities in their programming. We invite you to read the guide and share it with arts organizations in your own area.

We hope you enjoy the beautiful work selected for this year's arts issue. If you are an artist who has a disability, we encourage you to submit your own creative work for consideration for future arts issues at any time at [tnddc@tn.gov](mailto:tnddc@tn.gov).

— Wanda Willis

## A Message From the Director of Arts Access, Tennessee Arts Commission



I was thrilled to join the Tennessee Arts Commission staff as Director of Arts Access this past September. Prior to joining the Tennessee Arts Commission, I worked as director of programs for the National Museum of African American Music and as vice president of programs at the Scarritt-Bennett Center. Forming relationships with all of you and continuing the conversation about improving access to the arts is what I look forward to the most, and working with the Tennessee Council on Developmental Disabilities is a huge part of that.

Through partnership with the Council and nonprofits across the state, the Tennessee Arts Commission's goal is to continue the vital task of expanding accessibility, participation and inclusion in the arts. This past year our website was redesigned, making it more accessible and informative. In addition to other materials, resources and webinars, the Arts Access page currently hosts, "A Guide for Expanding Access to the Arts for Persons with Disabilities," which would not have been possible without the Council's staff. The guide gives strategies for expanding arts access; tips on how to know and cater to your audience; programming suggestions for inclusion; marketing strategies; as well as some unexpected benefits of accessibility.

I hope that as you look through this edition of *Breaking Ground* you will see the incredible power of the arts in the lives of persons with disabilities, and the ways that the artists have affected others. Take a moment to also explore the "Guide for Expanding Access" and join the movement of making the arts a possibility for all people, and for the benefit of all Tennessee communities.

— Kim Johnson

## A Few Words From the Executive Director, Tennessee Arts Commission



With the mission of cultivating the arts for the benefit of all Tennesseans and their communities, the Tennessee Arts Commission commends the efforts of *Breaking Ground* to celebrate arts specifically in relation to individuals with disabilities. Seeing the work that is created in these publications, the Arts Commission is honored to partner with the Tennessee Council of Developmental Disabilities for the annual arts issue.

The arts are essential to a vibrant community - affording benefits through quality of life, economic development, tourism and providing a more balanced education for our children. As reflected in the Commission's core values and five-year strategic plan, increasing accessibility and participation in the arts for persons with disabilities is not only an issue of equity, but also an invaluable enrichment to our state as a whole.

— Anne B. Pope

2015/2016 Annual Arts Issue

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Tennessee Council on Developmental Disabilities, Authorization No. 344095, January 2016, 5,400 copies. This public document was promulgated at a cost of \$1.03 per copy.

# Daddy by Ken Muller Hid The Moon

Each morning about dawn my dad shuffles out the front door, navigates the cluttered porch and cautious steps, ambles across a patchwork path of stones old and new, ascends the 'Mail Steps' he helped build and claims the morning paper. Near the door hangs a sweater and jacket that he might grab as suits his fancy, but usually chooses to "brave the elements" than change from his plan as what the weather should be. On the return trip he always checks a thermometer by the swing and scans the sky for portents and clues. Aye, daddy is a sooth-sayer, a seer – and you'd better pay attention.

He is nigh on ninety and remembers more than those who didn't live that long, but less than some who did – and by some mysterious casting of stones has been determined to have dementia. This is to say he doesn't measure up to standards and expectations of some professionals, and I can assure you they certainly don't measure up to his. As a care-giver I try to find a balance between needs and wants he expresses and those he is told he ought to have. My own perceptions cloud the horizon a bit, but I try to listen more than talk. Only thing predictable about dad's form of divination is that it won't come tumbling out all at once, but will be found in a flavoring of all he says throughout the day. It would be a reach too far to say he whistles up the sunrise, but if he doesn't whistle I'd better pay attention – and if he doesn't comment on the sunrise I'd better check his pulse.

This morning he commented on there being a bright half-moon overhead and entreated me to look out the window and marvel at the sight. I know that he was making a statement about the

storm of last night's fury having broken, and that the possibility of a walk in the park was enhanced by providence – or his will. He added, "It's a bit chilly but I don't need my coat." Then, foreseeing my question he mumbled, "Didn't check the teller – didn't see any frost."

So I asked in mirth, "What did you do with the rest of the moon?"

"Hid it," he chuckled – and he surely has!

I know that as we stroll in the park today he will comment on how God is saying "welcome" with sunbeams through the clouds. He will pick up bits of trash, both to do his part – but also to see what is hidden underneath. We will discover hints of pending spring within the shadows of winter's claim on skeleton trees and fading leaves – a world at half-moon. And he will make his prediction a reality, finding awe and wonder in simple things, and through caring make of life – half again – half-again more. Can we do more? Our ability to shape our future must be based on what brought us to this day – of finding balance between scrambled memories and perceptions of being. It is today's decisions that matter, and we could do worse than looking to the sky each morning and creating a day half hidden from others and working to give it meaning for everyone.

Shine on dad – you need not hide from me.

*Ken Muller is a disabled Viet Nam Vet living in Dandridge, Tennessee with his service dog, Limora, wife Emmie and her service dog, Branwen.*

# The Joy

A few years ago, administrative staff at SRVS (Shelby Residential and Vocational Services) in Memphis had a notion that the people they served – primarily adults with intellectual disabilities – might enjoy some exposure to dance. “The original impetus, and our drive, was focused on giving the people we support access to a creative form of movement, to allow them to express themselves in ways that they might not have before,” said Astrid French, SRVS’s curriculum coordinator. “We were hoping to give them a way to connect and use their bodies to create joy and happiness through dance, and to have a really good time!”

It started out small, and casual. A local dance teacher offered to come to SRVS and teach a few dance classes. To the staff’s pleasant surprise, many of the people they serve took to the opportunity with gusto. “There was such an amazing level of participation and support, and engagement by the individuals with disabilities, that it really signaled to us that this would be a great opportunity to offer them access to the arts in a more creative and different way, through the form of dance,” said Astrid.



In response, SRVS sought a grant which they received from the Tennessee Arts Commission (the co-sponsor of this special issue). They were also able to acquire a matching donor for that grant, Dr. Jim Hunt, a nephrologist in the Memphis area. This enabled SRVS to offer regular dance classes twice a week, beginning in the Fall of 2013.

# of Dance

by Ned Andrew Solomon

Unfortunately, by the time the grant monies were made available, the original instructor had moved to another state. With her typical optimism, Astrid took that in stride. “It didn’t matter; the support was there, the enthusiasm was there, the interest was there,” said Astrid. “It was just a matter of finding a talented dance instructor.”

Enter, stage right, Delilah Van Sciver, an energetic local dance teacher who commandeered the program for the next 18 months, and helped it become an established fixture in SRVS’s offerings. After Delilah, Stephanie Hill took the reins, and is in her second full year with the program. A lead instructor for Ballet on Wheels - an afterschool dance program for children - Stephanie fit in immediately and, according to Astrid, has been able to take the program to the next level. “She is very energetic, and hands-on with the recipients,” Astrid said. “She has them up and moving and grooving for the entire class. She has an ability to inspire and motivate our adults with disabilities to dance.”

She’s also spent some time choreographing small dance routines that the participants have learned and then performed in recitals at SRVS, which take place in the Winter, the Spring and for Valentine’s Day.



Photos by Kyle Kurlick and Diana Fedinec.



Since the recitals require more practice and commitment to learn the routines, they have become an avenue for the participants who want to take their dancing a little more seriously. So SRVS and Stephanie now offer two different classes – one for folks who want to “turn the music on, cut loose and just have a good time”, and a second class for a core group of individuals who have the desire to focus on the choreography, and the performances.

For either level of participation, the benefits abound. “Dancing is a really interesting form of exercise,” explained Astrid. “It gets your endorphins going, as you’re using your body in a fun and joyful way. We knew that a by-product of that would be increased range of motion, and increased stamina, possibly increased flexibility and increased socialization, because a lot of the dances they do with each other, holding hands. We had a lot of dance activities where they would partner with somebody and have eye-to-eye contact and interaction.”

This program is not mandatory for those who receive SRVS’s services.. But the staff goes out of their way to make sure every individual associated with SRVS is aware of the program, and invited to take part. Some just come to observe; others start on the sidelines and after a few classes jump right in. “One gentleman, an older gentleman of retirement age, sat patiently and watched, not wanting to participate for the first five classes,” recalled Astrid. “But for the entire rest of the year he got up and was moving and dancing with his peers, and really loving it.”

The SRVS dance program is reaching out to the community-at-large as well. The last class of every month is free and open to all adults with disabilities in the Memphis area. Astrid has invited people associated with the Down Syndrome Society of Memphis and the Mid-South, the West TN Autism Society, The Arc

*Ned Andrew Solomon is director of the Partners in Policymaking program, and editor-in-chief of Breaking Ground.*

**“turn the music on,  
cut loose and just  
have a good time”**

Mid-South and the local Best Buddies chapter to join in. This year, that open class will be moved to the Memphis Community Center, to make it easier for people outside of SRVS, including local seniors, to attend. “We really want it to be an inclusive class for all adults who enjoy dancing,” Astrid said.

With the obvious success of the dance program, SRVS has been exploring other arts programming that might benefit, and delight, the people they serve. Toward that end, they recently applied for, and received, another generous grant from the Tennessee Arts Commission that will be administered through Arts Memphis. It will enable SRVS to bring a theater program to one of its satellite locations in the rural and more underserved Tipton County. That program will begin in Spring 2016.

In the meantime, Astrid hopes they’ll be able to expand their current dance offerings soon. “I would love to provide dance/movement activities that spark so much joy three to four times a week,” she said. “Just think about the potential emotional, behavioral and health benefits!”





# DREAM PALATE

by April D. Meredith

The soothing shades of blue  
Ocean, sky, and royal too  
Vibrant pops of orange and yellow  
For happiness, health, and feeling mellow  
Hunter green, teal, and lime  
White and grey which reveal time  
Blood red, dark brown, and pitch black  
You can put them down, but not take them back  
Peachy pink, soft and sweet  
Add vanilla cream to top the treat  
Purple notes, trimmed in gold  
Fits kings and queens, both young and old  
Mix two or three to make another  
Color cousins from primary mothers  
What beautiful discoveries I can find  
But trapped within my sleeping mind

*As a person with RP (Retinitis Pigmentosa), one of the greatest challenges I have had to face is rectifying the fact that I still vividly experience colors in my dreams at night but wake up every morning to a virtually colorless world.*

*- April D. Meredith*

*April Meredith is a 2015 Partners in Policymaking graduate who serves on the State Legislative Committee for the National Federation of the Blind as well as on the executive board and advisory committee for People First of TN. She strives to make a positive difference in her community through her actions and writings.*

# **Pendent**

by Jese Hill

The rain felt good on his face,  
a taste of heaven, chilling him,  
emphasizing the vacancy of the  
neighboring swing.

He was pendent in the orange light,  
wanting to fly, talking to God:  
questions of his plans--why, how--a  
plea for that vacancy to be filled;  
looking past the love he already has...

Searching for intimacy, late-night  
conversation, warm life, pulsation,  
a promise of I'll-see-you-tomorrow...

He thought he lost it, she was  
never in it...It's good that he never  
made three-word promises, never  
made dreams out of it...

A shooting star had lost its luster--passe,  
falling away with another man's dream.

There are none out tonight; only  
rain falls on his lips, mingling with the  
voices of children who compose games.

These chains keep him from flying.

He resorts to false premises,  
trying to ignore his captivity...

He longs to take flight...but, where would  
he go? Where would the Wind take him?

It's hard to take flight, when you're always  
looking down, holding fast to the safety net...

*Jese Hill is 22 years old and has cerebral palsy.  
He lives in Watertown, Tennessee, and is currently  
enrolled in Tennessee Bible College and the Partners  
in Policymaking Leadership Institute.*

# **Persecuted and forbidden**

by Mary Catherine McEwen

Persecuted and forbidden  
I dance in naked joy  
The wings of dusk I've ridden  
With hope my heart will toy

The beauty of the darkness  
Illuminates my soul  
The strength of night I harness  
When absence plays its role

My many other senses  
Used when I cannot see  
Unhindered by day's pretense  
Now in the night are free

So dance under the moon  
Come count the many stars  
For when we hear dawn's tune  
We'll hide from who we are

*Mary Catherine McEwen is a  
21-year-old on the autism spectrum.*

Photos by Debbie Riffle

# We Are ALL

# More

# Alike

by Debbie Riffle

Our new life adventure began the day our son Kevin was born 16 years ago, when we were told he had Down syndrome. We had never actually met anyone with Down syndrome and had no idea what to expect. Little did we know that it would be the adventure of a lifetime.

Much like new parents of any new baby, we fell madly in love with our beautiful son, and were also a little anxious about the days ahead. We introduced him to family and friends right away and shared with everyone that he was born with Down syndrome. We wanted to go ahead and answer questions and overcome any concerns so we could all move on and enjoy our new baby. Our adventure has taken many different turns throughout the first few years, elementary, middle and high school.

The early years were full of educating ourselves about Down syndrome, searching out resources, and establishing a network of wonderful, supportive doctors and therapists. We had lots of memorable family times filled with laughter, sweet hugs and kisses. We also celebrated many milestones.

We surrounded ourselves with caring, positive people which formed the foundation of our parenting philosophy for raising a child with special needs, as well as the

and meeting people. We "shared" Kevin with everyone – by that, I mean we gave everyone the opportunity to get to know him, learn about him and enjoy his bubbly personality. We knew that Kevin could teach other people just as much as others could teach him.



**Kevin with SGC Senior Band Leader**

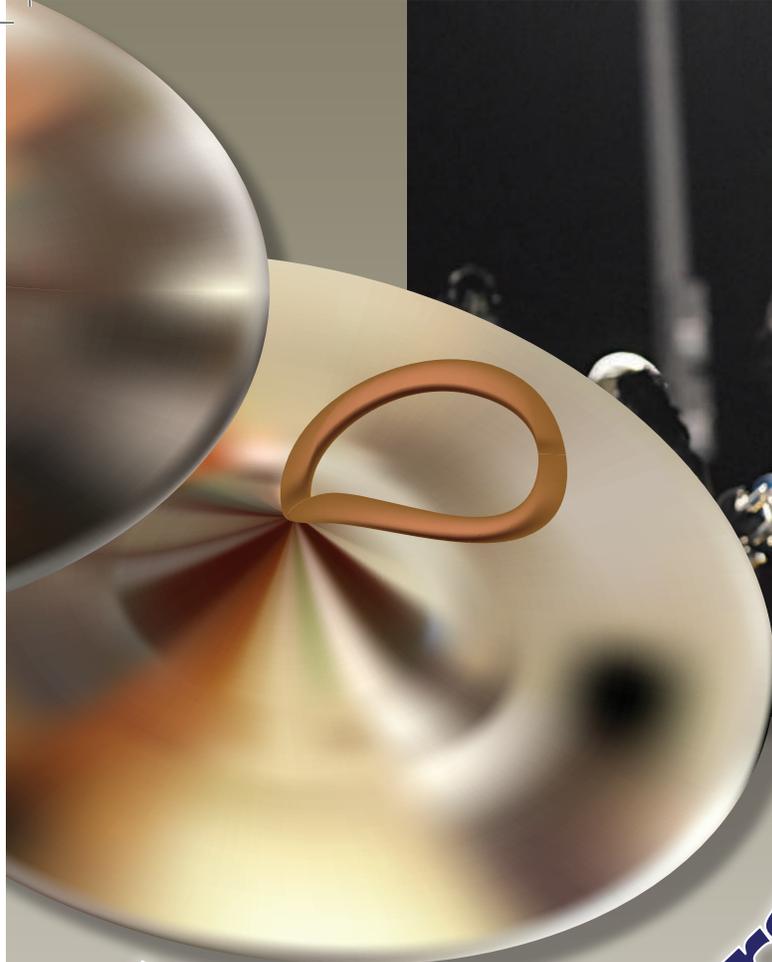
The elementary and middle school years were a learning experience for figuring out how inclusion works. We were very blessed to live in a smaller community where most everyone knew our family and were anxious to learn about inclusive practices and setting the bar high for other students with disabilities that would follow in years to come.

Every school year there were questions about how to modify materials in the general education classroom in order to create a successful environment for Kevin. The teachers and administrators worked with us as a team to brainstorm, overcome obstacles and celebrate his success. Kevin made a lot of true friends at school. They all loved working in group activities with him and jumped right in to help out when needed.



**Kevin with SGC percussion friends**

importance of inclusion. Like many typical families, we were always on the go to school events with our teenage daughter, church, dinners, movies and vacations. Kevin loved going new places

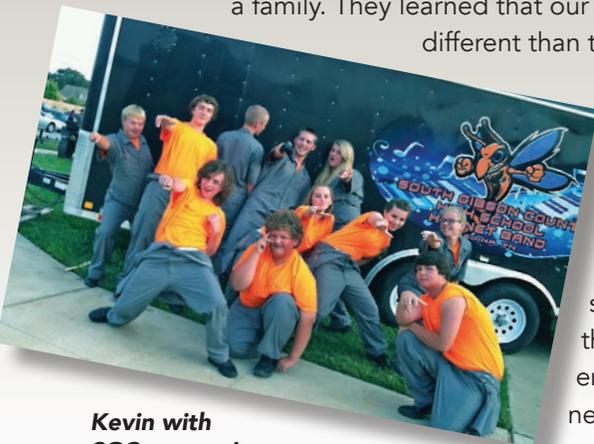


**Kevin performing with SGC Band at a football game**

# Than Different

For many years, we had class parties at our home that included cookouts and outside games. We always invited the children from his class, their parents, siblings and teachers. It was a wonderful opportunity for us to get to know other parents and for them to get to know us as a family. They learned that our family was no

different than theirs - we just



**Kevin with SGC percussion friends**

happened to have a son with Down syndrome, who enjoyed all of the same things their children enjoyed. I will never forget a parent comment

to me at the beginning of school

one year. She said that her son was so upset he wasn't in Kevin's class that year because he loved coming to Kevin's house. My heart just swelled!

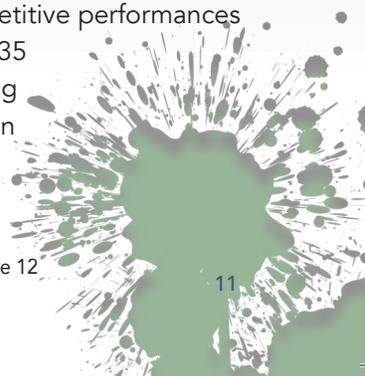
In middle school we discovered Kevin's passion and talent for music. Since he was included in the general

education classroom at school, he had the opportunity to take band and learn how to play the recorder. The band teacher was surprised how fast he picked up playing his instrument and participated in class. Kevin played along with his classmates in band concerts and also learned how to play percussion instruments. An assistant went to band class with him to modify the music by writing the alphabetical letter above the notes on the sheet of music. The band teacher, assistant, and fellow classmates helped Kevin learn the music and play multiple percussion instruments. They also recorded the music on Kevin's iPad to practice at home. There was lots of practice at home! Needless to say, I learned how to play the instruments right along with Kevin.

It was a wonderful, rewarding experience for all of us. It was so exciting to see Kevin's confidence and self-esteem grow as he learned right along with his peers in band. At the end of 8th grade, we were approaching our next adventure of marching band in high school. Was I ready for this? Like I had any choice! Just like supporting our daughter's passions and dreams, we were there to support Kevin's. Whatever it took to make it happen ...

High school and marching band has been even more of a learning experience for all of us. Now we had to take into account how to prepare for bus rides to games and competitions at unfamiliar locations, setting up equipment, inclement weather, competitive performances and marching in parades. There are 135 students in the South Gibson Marching Band which is led by directors Stephen Price and Erin Ison. Kevin goes to long, hot practices in the summer at band camp. They learn new music,

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## ...More Alike

Continued from page 11

instruments and run laps to get in shape for marching season. Kevin plays percussion instruments such as the bells, snare drum, bass drum, cymbals and gong. They use the same modifications as in middle school, including recording music on his iPad for practice at home.

High school band students are a close knit group. They work together as a team to help each other because each person's part relies heavily on the other. Again, Kevin is no different than any other band student. He is expected to follow the rules and do his best. Thankfully, he has 135 friends in the band to learn from and support him.

When we travel to other schools for games and competitions, other parents, spectators and judges see firsthand how South Gibson has been successful in including students with disabilities in a meaningful way in the band program. We have many positive, supportive comments and inquiries from other schools when they see our band perform. Yes, there are many challenges but we work together as a team to overcome them one at a time. As in anything worthwhile, it's hard work and commitment. In the end, we all learn from the experience.

Kevin's opportunity in the band has given him self-confidence and self-esteem, as well as taught him the importance of following rules and hard work. It has taught his family and teachers that inclusion opens up opportunities, creates meaningful friendships and simply makes a difference. It taught all of the others that watch our band performances and meet Kevin that individuals with disabilities have hopes, dreams and talents just like everyone else.

We are all more alike than different. Every family has its challenges and adventures. We all love our children and would do anything to support their hopes and dreams. Every child has a unique personality and individual talents. We all thrive through family support and friendships. We learn from each other to make a difference in someone else's life.

Thank you to everyone who has made a difference in Kevin's life!

*This article is in special memory of our dear friend Jane Dunlap. Debbie serves as a member of the Tennessee Council on Developmental Disabilities and is a graduate of the Partners in Policymaking Leadership Institute.*

## A Winter Prison

by Brian McHan

The snow covers the road  
It is very deep  
There's no reason to travel  
It's too cold to go out  
A son and his mother are in a winter prison  
That there's no reason to escape  
There's plenty of heat  
The electricity works well  
They are both older  
And less bolder  
So they look at old pictures  
And remember the past  
Eat beef stew  
And enjoy talking  
Perhaps soon the snow will melt  
And the World will function again  
But for now they enjoy each other's company  
And remember what has been

*Oftentimes those with mental health issues have their parents become their primary caretakers. My mother has been mine and has endured much hardship doing so. This was based on a more pleasant moment between hospitalizations back in March. – Brian C. McHan*



### **Sharon Stolberg Mountain Climbing**

— by Andrew Skobac

### **ANDREW SKOBAC**

has been climbing for 10 years, and volunteering for adaptive climbing groups for the past three. He lives in West Chester, Pennsylvania where he is a prosthetic resident. Sharon Stolberg is a special education teacher in Cleveland, TN and a Partners grad.

### **BARBARA SHIRLEY**

says creating works of art helps her express her feelings. She is very inventive with materials and creates life with dimensional flowers, stems and details.



### **Rose Garden**

— by Barbara Shirley



### **Sumi-E Blue-Orange**

— by Grace Goad

### **GRACE 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.



**TABITHA PAIGE WEST**

has a genetic syndrome called 1p36 Deletion Syndrome. She annually participates in the Courageous Expressions art exhibit featured at the Vanderbilt Kennedy Center, and also has exhibits featured at The Artable Collection at the condos of Village Green Hills and Capitol Bank.

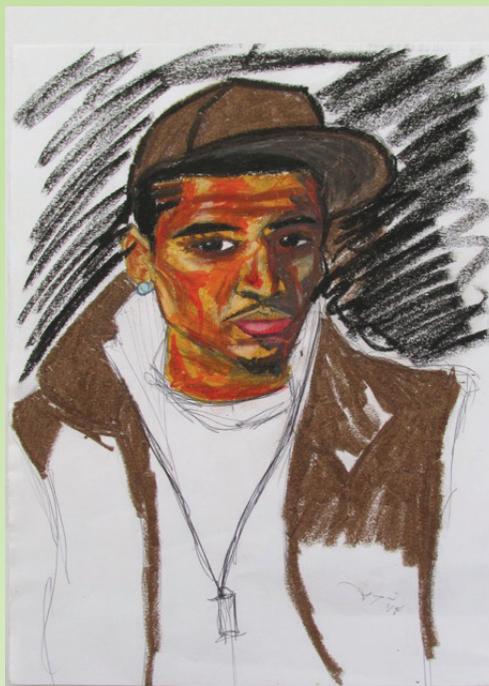
**Untitled #2**

— by Tabitha West



**AUGIE COLLIER**

of Nashville captures the personality of people. He interprets his subject with a unique flair and works quickly to capture the essence of the scene. He uses a variety of mediums including acrylics, oils, charcoal and oil pastels.



**Hip Hop**

— by Augie Collier



**Still Life with Avocado**

— by Nancy Olson

**LOUISE MCKOWN**

At age 40, Louise McKown was diagnosed with a rare progressive neurological condition, olivo ponto cerebellar atrophy, which affects her speech, fine motor skills, walking and balance. She works at the East TN Technology Access Center, and is a graduate of Partners.

**Ceramic Plate**

— by Louise McKown



**NANCY OLSON**

says art is a way of communication often better than words. She especially enjoys creating art in her Our Place peer center in Murfreesboro where making art breaks isolation and helps her relax and deal with anxiety.

**ERIN BRADY WORSHAM**

Nashville artist and writer, Erin Brady Worsham, was chosen to create the 2015 annual commemorative artwork for the National Center for Farmworker Health in Texas. Fine art prints, commemorative posters and greeting cards of Worsham's piece, "Tender Strength," are being sold to raise money for small scholarships for people in their organization who wish to continue their education in migrant health issues.



**Tender Strength**  
— by Erin Brady Worsham



**Peacocks**  
— by Laura Hudson

**LAURA HUDSON**

of Nashville lets her imagination take form in exquisite birds with bright plumage set in lush tropical scenes full of flowers and plants. Her drawings come to life with color and detail. She says, "Making art gets rid of my depression."



**JOSEPH MCNINCH**  
lives in Mt. Juliet. He loves taking abstract photos, and loves vacuum cleaners.

**Vacuum Cleaner Abstract**  
— by Joseph McNinch



**Carnival**  
— by Derrick Freeman

**DERRICK FREEMAN** is a prolific and talented artist who is on the autism spectrum.





**From L to R: Lori Kissinger, Lauren Rudd (quilt designer from MTSU), Ellen Susman (Director of State Art in Embassies Program) and Ambassador Jean Kennedy Smith at the US Capitol.**

*Photo by Reflections Photography of Arlington, VA.*

# VSA Spreads Art & Disability Awareness Around the World

by Lori Kissinger

Sometimes the smallest ideas end up yielding the most beautiful results. 40 Days Around the World was such a project for VSA Tennessee, the state's organization on arts and disability.

VSA Tennessee presented the project as a way for VSA Affiliates to celebrate the 40th anniversary of the international VSA program, created by Jean Kennedy Smith, sister to President John F. Kennedy. VSA Affiliates would be encouraged to host an art exchange with at least one other VSA Affiliate within a 40-day window leading up to the John F. Kennedy Center's planned celebration in July.

However, there was concern over the limited exposure of such individual and isolated endeavors. Therefore, it was decided that the event would become a 40-day digital festival showcasing Affiliate art/education exchanges. This idea blossomed into 40 different art/education exchanges yielding a bountiful amount of materials ranging from lesson plans, photos, video, letters and more. States and countries without VSA Affiliates joined in the celebration, resulting in 60 nations and 37 states participating in 40 events that would be showcased in the digital festival.

Yet, the idea was not finished growing. Next came the quilt concept. VSA Tennessee proposed that a quilt

be created in which ALL of the Affiliates could work together. The quilt squares that arrived included loom woven squares, embroidery, batik, and hand-painted cloth squares along with typical quilt squares. These squares came from all over the country and throughout the world.

The squares did not travel alone. They came with stories that told of the hopes and dreams that had inspired these individual pieces of art.

The entire project fell on the shoulders of VSA Tennessee without any funds or

technical expertise to make the project happen. Middle Tennessee State University stepped in as the primary partner providing a wealth of expertise and services. Topping the list of MTSU help was Lauren Rudd who configured the quilt and worked with young people in middle Tennessee with disabilities to quilt the squares into a masterpiece. The Tennessee Arts Commission, Community Foundation, Ann Krafft, Public Consulting Group, East Tennessee Foundation, Memorial Foundation, and some private individuals all pitched in.



As the beauty of the quilt was unfolding, it also became apparent that this quilt was without a home. The original idea of where the quilt would reside fell through, leaving its future “dangling by a thread”.

What happened next can only be described as a miracle. The U.S. Department of State decided to showcase the quilt in its main gallery for two months. This showcase grew to a formal reception, a note in their newsletter, and the attention of high-ranking individuals such as the Director of Civil Rights. Ambassador Jean Kennedy Smith responded to an inquiry and agreed to participate in a reception for the quilt that would be given at the U.S. Capitol.

The reception at the Capitol was due to the efforts of Tennessee Congressman Diane Black. Secretary of State John Kerry wrote a letter in support of the quilt that placed it into the hands of the Art in Embassies program of the U.S. Department of State. It was declared a part of American Heritage to travel around the world to U.S. embassies for perpetuity. The “quilt without a home” now belonged to the annals of American history as a symbol of the abilities of people with disabilities from around the world.

As the digital festival was in preparation, VSA Tennessee hoped this project would represent VSAs from around the world and the artistic accomplishments of

people with disabilities. However, it was also important to make it known that this project was conceived and delivered by the State of Tennessee. Governor Haslam was approached to make comments that could be used at the opening of



**From L to R: Steve Ramirez (Chairperson Disability Action Group US Dept of State), Lori Kissinger, John Robinson (Director of Office of Civil Rights) and Sarah Tanguy (Curator in the US Department of State Art in Embassies Program) at the US Department of State.**

Photo by Christian Kissinger.

the festival. He and First Lady Chrissy Haslam graciously provided a wonderful commentary that can be viewed at <http://40days.vsatn.org/>.



**Back side of the quilt.** Photo by Tiffani Bing.

The soul of this program is in the stories. The Russian organization that changed policy so children with disabilities could participate; the US Embassy in Sudan that opened its doors every Saturday morning so children, walking across battlegrounds, could Skype with artists; participation from both Israel and Palestine; the child who discovered that college was an option; and this list goes on.

This story could have been written from so many different angles, and there is so much to say. It was a series of so many unexpected and unexplained events that sent the project straight off the charts, even without a budget or administrative support.

Then there are the stories of the impact of the project. Each quilt square has a story. Each of the 40-days projects has a story. To understand why the project was important and unique, it is those stories that should be told.

*Lori Kissinger is the founding executive director of VSA Tennessee, which is in its 15th year, and a full time instructor in communication at Middle Tennessee State University.*



# VSA Corporate Arts Program

by Lori Kissinger  
Photos by Lori Kissinger

In the summer of 2014, VSA Tennessee became aware of a very successful Corporate Arts Program run by VSA Colorado. After discussing the project with Colorado, VSA Tennessee decided to try it here.

The concept begins with a professional artist working with a group of young adults with disabilities in creating a commissioned piece of art for a corporation. In the spring of 2015, VSA Tennessee ran such a program under the guidance of artist Yvette Parrish with First Tennessee Bank as the Corporate Partner.

The second stage is to expand the program under a grant. Colorado received a grant from its arts commission, and VSA Tennessee followed suit, securing a grant from the Tennessee Arts Commission. Through the grant, four projects will take place in various areas of the State, under the direction of different professional artists. As before, each artist will work with a group of young people with disabilities on a commissioned piece of art for a selected corporation. The plan is that these pieces of art will become samples for future corporations to see and that the current corporation partners will provide testimonials.

The participating artists/corporations are Dee Kimbrell and Major Family Chiropractic; Amy Beth Rice and FedEx; Tammy Vice and Imagination Branding; and Bailey Earith and Visit Knoxville.

The goal for the next stage is to have corporations pay for commissioned work in which a portion will go to the young developing artists. The young artists will learn artistic



**Torrie Summers at First Tennessee Bank with her finished product.**

techniques, develop skills in working with corporations, gain exposure and receive some compensation for their work.

**Torrie Summers and Yvette Cowden work on their joint project.**



# Dance Star & 2 Dance 2 Dream

by Kimmie Jones



Photos by Cole Freeman

Dance Star, a local dance studio in Murfreesboro, and 2 Dance 2 Dream, a non-profit based in Austin, Texas, have partnered together to offer an amazing program which brings the art of dance to children and adults with a variety of disabilities.

Dance Star has offered these unique experiences at no cost to the families who participate since March 2014. The Dance 2 Dream program's instructors and volunteers welcome dancers with all types of disabilities including, but not limited to, cerebral palsy, spinal bifida, autism and Down syndrome. The studio is also the first in the state to be certified in Autism Movement therapy.

Classes are scheduled on Saturday mornings and cover a variety of dance styles: ballet; tap; jazz; lyrical; pointe and Hip hop. In addition, participants can get a work out through tumbling, twirling, Zumba, musical theater and toning.

Incorporating dancers with various disabilities in one class may have its challenges, but this program has created a system to handle the task. In addition to the instructors, there is a team of volunteer assistants who provide support based on the number of dancers and their individual needs. "Understanding that each dancer is going to need various levels and types of assistance, we invite and encourage the class to voice when they need assistance, but to try it on their own first," said Cole Freeman, the program's coordinator. "In the near future, we are also looking for ways to better equip volunteers with basic understanding in how to approach modifications for dancers in wheelchairs, dancers with autism, and everything in between."

The program, offered to children of 18 months to adults, has had a big impact on the families who participate. Jennifer gets to watch her daughter Olivia via a closed caption TV in the studio's lobby, and has really seen the transformation she has

made through the art of dance. "Cole and the other ladies at Dance Star have made Olivia's dance dream come true! It breaks my heart to see Olivia want to go to dance with other little girls her age, but to be unable due to her physical disabilities. But Dance Star has given Olivia a chance to put her disability aside and to enjoy being a normal little girl with big dreams!"

Sarah, a 28-year-old who uses a wheelchair due to Spina Bifida and her boyfriend, Nick, who is 33 and legally blind, began the program last year and discovered a newfound love of dance. "At the end of our class we feel so energized and



*making  
dance  
accessible  
to all*

empowered by our experience! Keenly aware of our unique differences, they modify the class routine for us, and always have suggestions for moves and stretches we can practice on our own, in between classes."

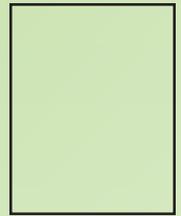
Through levels and modifications, the staff and volunteers who participate in the 2 Dance 2 Dream program through Dance Star have created a fun, safe, social environment for students to celebrate their unique abilities, to have fun, and to learn to love the art of dance.

*Kimmie Jones is the social media and outreach coordinator for Tennessee Disability Pathfinder.*



**Tennessee Council on Developmental Disabilities**

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**Portrait**

— by Augie Collier