

breaking ground



2024 ANNUAL
ARTS ISSUE

ISSUE 117

breaking ground



COVER: **Let There Be Light - Alyssa Ray** - Alyssa Ray is 24 years old, has autism, enjoys all of the visual arts, especially nature photography and architecture. She participates with AbleVoices and Borderless Arts TN. She likes getting out to explore new places and revisit familiar ones to capture photos to share with others. This light fixture is one of many lighting the tunnel between the Cordell Hull Building and the Capitol. Let There Be Light won 3rd place in Still Life at the 2022 Williamson County Fair.



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Learn more about the Tennessee Council on Developmental Disabilities. 615.532.6615 | www.tn.gov/cdd | www.facebook.com/TNCouncilonDD | Tnodd@tn.gov
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This project was supported in part by grant number 2101TNSCDD, from the U.S. Administration for Community Living, Department of Health and Human Services, Washington, D.C. 20201. Grantees undertaking projects with government sponsorship are encouraged to express freely their findings and conclusions. Points of view or opinions do not, therefore, necessarily represent official ACL policy.



Tennessee Council on Developmental Disabilities

Readers,

It's the issue we wait for all year long – the arts issue!

I love everything about this process. From the time we launch a call for artwork on social media, I love to watch you tag artists you know and encourage them to apply. That, in itself, is a recognition of each other's talents – which is what the arts issue is all about. As we watch the submissions come in, we marvel at each one. Each represents a piece of its creator; an expression of something you've felt and experienced. We get to feel it, too, because you were brave enough to share it. Thank you to every submitter for that privilege.

Art fosters a human connection like no other medium. As you open this magazine, I hope you are able to feel that. I hope you feel a connection with people who you may otherwise never meet. I hope you imagine the experiences of someone whose life is fundamentally different than yours. That is what I look forward to every year; it is why the arts issue is so special.

Sit down in a comfortable place – maybe with a cup of tea or something similarly soothing for you – and soak it all in.

Enjoy!

—Lauren Percy, Executive Director, TN Council on Developmental Disabilities



Borderless Arts Tennessee

Borderless Arts TN is honored to continue the partnership for this edition of *Breaking Ground*.

We believe that the arts can be found in all aspects of life from the clothes we wear, to the furniture we use, to the cars we drive, to the art on walls. We play numerous “roles” in our lives while listening to the sounds that surround us and using those sounds to move between life's moments. We are each unique, living artworks.

In this edition of *Breaking Ground*, we get to see the uniqueness of the individual through his/her art. This edition shows how life and art are forever intertwined.

—Lori Kissinger, Executive Director, Borderless Arts Tennessee



TN Arts Commission

Though we bid farewell to two impactful programs this year, their lasting impression remains. The Tennessee Arts Commission's **Tennessee Person-Centered Music Program** served residents in nursing homes through individualized music. This highly successful program provided a powerful testament to the arts' ability to improve health in older adults, including those with disabilities. Likewise, **Creative Aging Tennessee II** linked organizations throughout Tennessee with trained artists ready to teach older adults arts programming. The program empowered hundreds of older adults through artistic engagement. It offered them a way to overcome the social challenges of isolation, leaving a legacy of community connection that continues to bloom.

Valuable lessons learned from previous initiatives like the Music Program and Creative Aging Tennessee II guide our ongoing commitment to accessibility. During the past year, we applied for and received additional national grant dollars to offer **Creative Aging Tennessee III**. This project will also focus on connecting community artists in rural and culturally specific communities with older adults to provide arts programming. We're also addressing artists' needs by partnering with Lifetime Arts for the first-ever training to serve individuals with cognitive and physical limitations. By listening to feedback, we're expanding training opportunities statewide through virtual sessions on accessibility, empowering all arts organizations to reach wider audiences. Alongside valuable partners like the Tennessee Council on Developmental Disabilities and Borderless Arts, we're excited to continue this journey of inclusion and creative expression for everyone.

This is just the beginning! Saying goodbye can be bittersweet, especially when it comes to impactful programs like these. However, their success in enriching the lives of older adults fills me with hope for the future. Their achievements inspire us to continue seeking innovative ways to improve the lives of all Tennesseans. We appreciate your support as we work tirelessly for all Tennesseans, regardless of ability or background.

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



The Show Must Go On: Borderless Arts Tennessee Debuts on Broadway

By Lori Kissinger, Executive Director of Borderless Arts TN

In 2022, the dance program of Borderless Arts Tennessee returned from dancing in Walt Disney World believing that nothing could be better. The group was the first group of dancers all with disabilities to perform in the Dance The World program on a stage at Disney World.

However, the group would be wrong in their thinking, because an even bigger opportunity was in store for them in 2023. Due to their performance at Disney World, the group was invited to perform on a Broadway stage in New York City!

The New York opportunity was even more exciting because it involved more than a performance on a Broadway Stage, which would have been monumental on its own. This opportunity would allow the dancers to take part in three intensive master classes with world class choreographers while working alongside able-bodied dancers. The group would also learn a dance with all the dancers and perform it at Times Square.

The summer saw a lot of work by the dancers as they prepared to meet this exciting opportunity. Yet,

sometimes reality is something for which we cannot prepare.

The New York activities were to begin with the Broadway dance performances. The Borderless Dance group flew out the night before this event, but a couple of the dancers were booked on a different flight – a flight that did not go out. These dancers were stranded. They were not just stranded for a few hours, but for an entire night.

As time continued to tick into the morning, one of the dancers already in New York with his family had a sibling who contracted food poisoning. She became so ill that an ambulance had to be called. Her mother rode to the hospital with her, leaving the dancer in the hands of the group.

The performance time rapidly approached. Our dance group rallied at the back of the stage with two dancers still missing and one dancer wondering about his sister at a hospital in an unfamiliar city. Yet, as the saying goes, “the show must go on.”

Just moments before the curtain call, the missing two dancers rushed in, pulling on their costumes while stumbling through a haze of no sleep... The troupe took the stage. The curtain pulled and the lights shone down.



The dancers hit their marks as only true professionals can do. It was the one dance that brought tears to the eyes of those off stage and brought the audience to their feet. It was a perfect show. No one else knew what it had taken to get there.

As the workshops began, other dance companies remarked on the passion and commitment these dancers gave to everything they did. They became the darlings of the event, winning the hearts of all around them.

It was not until they got back to Tennessee that anyone found out about all that the group was facing just moments before they stood on the biggest stage they had ever seen. No one could tell what this group had been through to make it that far. But to this group, the challenges started long before delayed planes and sick sisters. They had never let a challenge keep them from their dreams and they continued to hold to that standard.

Maybe the Broadway song "New York, New York" is true when it says, "If I can make it there, I can make it anywhere." These dancers did make it there. They were great ambassadors for dance, for Tennessee, for people with disabilities, and for themselves.

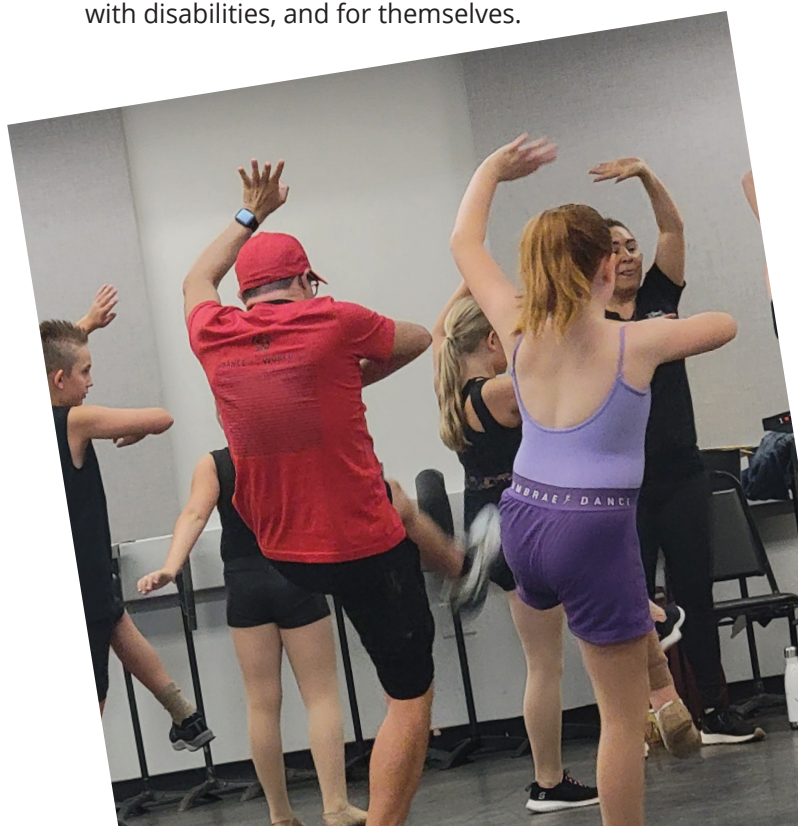
You may be thinking that the group finally made it to the top and that is the end of the story.... but it isn't. The group has now been invited by the U.S. Embassy in Belgium to visit this summer as part of a cultural exchange and perform at the U.S. ambassador's residence. We are watching world events to determine if this trip will take place, but the invitation stands. We hope to see them flying over the ocean at the end of May.

Remember, they already made it in New York. They can make it anywhere.

Lori Kissinger is Executive Director of Borderless Arts Tennessee. Borderless Arts is a statewide organization committed to inclusive and accessible arts programs for people with disabilities to enhance educational curriculum, enrich creative expression, empower career development, and encourage community engagement. Visit BorderlessArtsTN.org for more information.

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Editor's Note: We were proud to play a small role in helping the Borderless Arts TN dancers prepare for their Broadway debut by funding their extra trainings through our Council on Developmental Disabilities Scholarship Fund!



Sweetly Broken

By April (Tangela) Morman



VERSE ONE

She's a wonderful gift that this world doesn't see
She tries to hold on, and one day feel free
She's a blessing in disguise
Does this world realize?

VERSE TWO

She looks in the mirror every single day
Her eyes shed tears as she tries to pray
Bows her head and tries to speak
The hurt she hides makes her weak

PRE-CHORUS

At the end of the day
She hears God say

CHORUS

Hold on my child
I will lead the way
I'm the power, I am your victory
Hold on my child
Come and walk with me
I'm the power, I am your victory
Take hold of my hand and come walk with me

VERSE THREE

She cries every night and everyday
Just praying to "God" please take it away
She's been broken and damaged, confused
How could this world, leave so much abuse

CHORUS

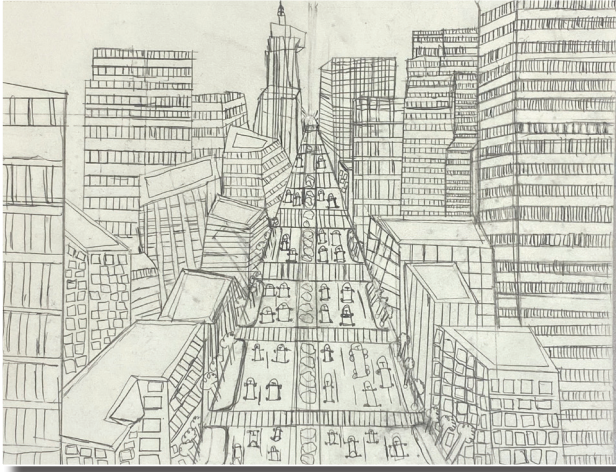
BRIDGE

I have promised you better than what you see here
This is all temporary I promise you I'm near
I know that you've questioned, dear lord why me
But look at how strong you became to be
So don't lose faith and yes you hold on tight
Because I have warned this world to get things right
And soon I will be coming and it will not be that long
I have forgiven all of your sins and all of your wrong
So, let go of your sorrows your worries your pain
And continue to pray my daughter and things will change

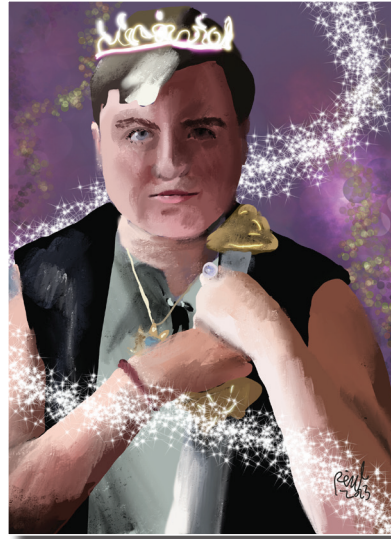


SCAN HERE TO LISTEN
TO SHANNON LABRIE
SINGING "SWEETLY
BROKEN" BY APRIL
(TANGELA) MORMAN.

I was born and raised in Tennessee. I am a single mom that suffers from a variety of disabilities. I have been told that I was here to tell my testimony, so I like to create poetry and songwriting that expresses things I have been through - to prayerfully be able to help others, as well. I was blessed to have singer-songwriter Shannon LaBrie sing my song, "Sweetly Broken," that I wrote.



New York City - Cameron Copeland - Pencil drawing. Cameron is 26 years old and has been a student at Trousdale School since 2019. Cameron has Alexander's Disease and is a local advocate for research and awareness of this neurological disorder. His favorite hobbies are drawing and archery.



King Reid - Reid Sybert - Reid is a 27-year-old artist who lives in Nashville. He loves to create art showcasing queer, body positive, and neurodivergent joy.



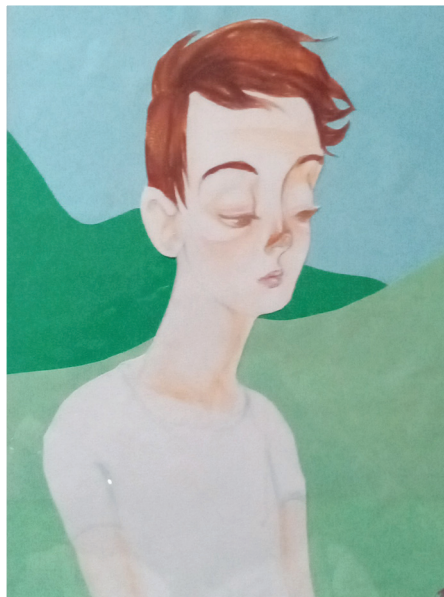
Nic Lampe knows how to have a good time. He is the life of the party, always ready to make someone laugh. He uses his creativity in many artistic modalities, including visual arts, live performances, and stand-up comedy. He is not afraid to use humor to shatter disability stigmas. He plans to continue doing so through his work at Friends Life Community.

SCAN THE QR CODE TO WATCH NIC LAMPE IN ACTION!

Like a true comedian, Nic uses humor to create connections around conversations that are typically avoided. In this Netflix-style comedy special, Nic is a self-proclaimed "stand-up comic who struggles to stand up." He is unafraid to address his disability head-on to break down barriers and connect with others through laughter.



Stuck in a Bubble - Sami Zinni My name is Sami Zinni. I love calling Franklin, TN my home. I am on the autism spectrum. I love being creative, whether it is through my computer or my camera. I enjoy using photoshop to enhance my creativity. I entered my photographs in the Williamson County Fair contest in 2022 and I am proud to say (the Ostrich and Bubble) photos won first place.



Boy - Eric Brito - Eric Brito of Nashville experiments with various mediums in pursuit of his artistic expression. He works independently at this time. When asked how art makes him feel, Eric replied, "Making art gives me pride and keeps me centered in life. I want to make sure I spend time having fun with art, and not get stuck on who likes my art."

Being Seen, Being Known: Friends Life Artists Expand Community through Art

By Bridget Bailey and Jennifer Haston, teaching artists, Friends Life Community

Artists with developmental disabilities at Friends Life Community tell their stories through the creation of original artwork. The process of self-expression and discovery allows these artists to communicate who they are and what is important to them. They connect with others through collaborative projects and sharing their artwork in exhibitions. They are professional artists who inspire others that work alongside them.

For the artists at Friends Life Community, 2023 was the year of being seen. FLC artists drive diversity in the Nashville art scene by driving a wrecking ball against stigmas and social barriers. To be seen is to be known. Last year, the artists' pieces dotted multiple art venues around town, from the Frist Art Museum to gallery spaces like The Browsing Room Gallery. Paintings and sculptures filled eight shows with various colorful visions expressing individual stories. Their inspiring works have also built partnerships with Zeitgeist Gallery, Belmont University's Art Department, and Harpeth Hall School. Each individual artist has become the face of social change in their community, taking risks and challenging themselves to find innovative ways to share their visions.

Jon Phillippi is one such risk-taker. Early in 2023, Jon had the opportunity to show at Zeitgeist Gallery. The show culminated in an artist talk in which Jon showed his paintings layered in watery pigments, swirling and

seeping into one another. The minimal color palate of his paintings contrasted with his sculptures of bright, found objects that embrace color and whimsy. At Zeitgeist, he answered questions about his body of work while gaining exposure to the greater Nashville community. He was seen and heard, front and center, uninhibited and inspirational.



Photo credit: Rory Fraser, Harpeth Hall School

Sean talking about his work at Harpeth Hall School

Communities are built by partnerships, and the strength of the FLC artists' work maintains a partnership with the Belmont University Art Department. The artists' first show of the year launched in Belmont's Leu Foyer Gallery with an exhibition called "The Ecology of Community." Their final show of 2023, entitled "We are Here to Inform," was housed in the Leu Center for Visual Arts. Both shows connected physical environments to the individual lives within them, helping us better understand each other. Both shows informed and spread the word about the importance of individuality. The artists created works reminiscent of vibrant fields of colorful wildflowers, playful dancing butterflies, and busy bees. Their work embodied the confidence of tall saplings and the wisdom of a root system stretching deep underground, connecting every being to a shared community.

Similarly, Harpeth Hall's show "Among Friends" featured nineteen FLC artists working together and sharing studio space with Harpeth Hall students, creating a dynamic energy and excitement. Sharing art



Photo credit: Rory Fraser, Harpeth Hall School

Grant talking about his work at Harpeth Hall School

and power through a collaborative gallery walk forged even more connections. Connections drawn between FLC artists and other artists make it clear that the work of FLC artists has its own place in the larger contemporary art world. Their voices are essential. The act of making is empowering, and seeing their art out in the world further empowers them to tell their stories. Based on his experience in the show, Sean said, "My art is like an experiment with confidence. I can accomplish something."

Sharing art with the world changes how you feel, which is evident in talking with FLC artists. They cite feeling happy, proud, powerful, important, and a part of a community. Community is a core value at FLC, and through the courage and self-expression of FLC artists, it is ever-expanding into something beyond our wildest imaginations.

Photo credit: Frist Art Museum

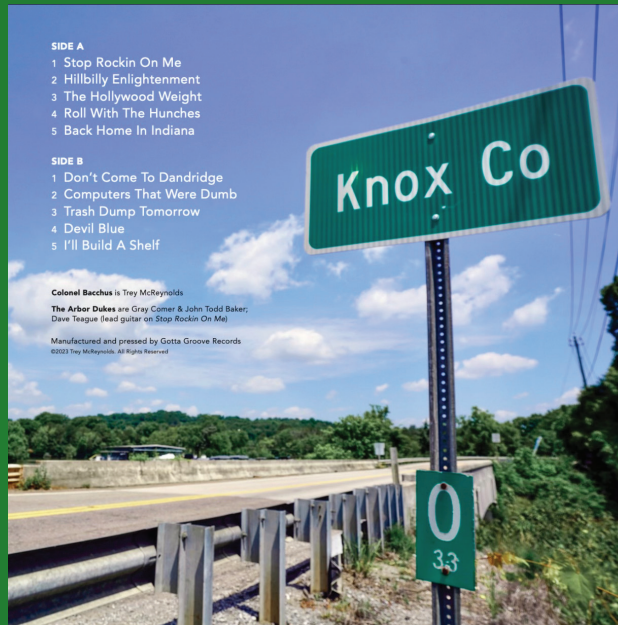


FLC artists and Bridget at the Frist Art Museum opening reception, for "The Power of Resilience"

Bridget Bailey and Jennifer Haston are teaching artists at Friends Life Community. They organize and curate art shows in the community and help facilitate the art making process in the FLC studio.



Colonel Bacchus and the Arbor Dukes - Journey to the Center of the Slime, Album cover by John McReynolds III - I live in Knoxville and am 59 years old. I suffer from neuropathy from chemo 3 years ago along with terminal cancer. I also have heart problems, which affects my energy. I have always made art and music. It is who I am.



- SIDE A**
- 1 Stop Rockin On Me
 - 2 Hillbilly Enlightenment
 - 3 The Hollywood Weight
 - 4 Roll With The Hunches
 - 5 Back Home In Indiana
- SIDE B**
- 1 Don't Come To Dandridge
 - 2 Computers That Were Dumb
 - 3 Trash Dump Tomorrow
 - 4 Devil Blue
 - 5 I'll Build A Shelf

Colonel Bacchus is Troy McReynolds
 The Arbor Dukes are Gray Carter & John Todd Baker;
 Dave Teague (lead guitar on Stop Rockin On Me)
 Manufactured and pressed by Gotcha Groove Records
 ©2023 Troy McReynolds. All Rights Reserved



SCAN HERE TO ACCESS THE DIGITAL ALBUM FOR JOURNEY TO THE CENTER OF THE SLIME

Let Them Speak

by Clark Wellman

What sound does the wind make?
Have you listened?
Can you understand the creek with it's accent?
Do you remember the stories the birds told
you as a child?

Let them speak.

Do you know your friends plights?
Your families?
Do you wear them like a tattoo?
Always remember what they told you while
you held silence?

Let them speak.

Have you heard the stories of the homeless
in your town?
The one who used to box or who recently had
their belongings stolen?

Let them speak.

Are those in distant lands on their own?
Or have you heard what they've been through?
Heard of those who had to leave home,
Heard the stories of those trying to survive in
a new life.

Let them speak.

Have you heard the whispers from the marginalized
in our home?
As they grow tired of telling a story that the privileged
aren't listening to.

Let them speak.

Whoever you send your thoughts and prayers to,
Do you talk the whole time or listen?

Let them speak.

Let Them Speak - Clark Wellman - My name is Clark and I grew up in Nashville and Murfreesboro. I am 24 years old and was diagnosed as bipolar when I was 16. I enjoy writing poetry and started in August 2022. I like to write poetry because it gives me the ability to put feelings and ideas that pass through my mind into words.



Myself in the Mirror - Meg Best - Marker Drawing. Meg is a 41-year-old woman with Down syndrome. She has been a student at Trousdale School since it opened in 2005. Meg has over 16 years' experience working at two local pharmacies in her hometown of Cleveland. Meg has a sunny disposition and loves to make other people smile!



Lunaria at Night - Sora (Anthony Bledsoe) - I'm a trans artist that goes by Sora. I make scenic art and have autism. I'm 22 and chaotic.



Racing Thoughts - Robin Key - I live in Knoxville, and am 53 years old. I live with bipolar disorder and chronic fatigue syndrome and am on disability for those and other chronic conditions. I make art to express myself and therapeutically. I use a variety of mediums. Anything from drawing with ink and water color pencils, collage, montage, photography. I also enjoy fiber arts and sculpture.



Untitled - Ashley Crutcher - "Greetings, I'm Ashley Crutcher. I'm interested in being a talented artist. I have been drawing at a very young age. This is my talent. I draw daily and love to do it any time or day. I will like to show you my work."



Bird Silhouette - Charlie Burows - I am 26 years old and live in Franklin. I am a photographer with AbleVoices. I like taking pictures of nature in and around Middle Tennessee.

Water Falls - Zackery Wilson - Various Media, Crayon, Pencils, Acrylic and Markers. Zackery Wilson, 25, attends Dyersburg State Community College, where he is studying art, drama, and music. He is the first student with Down syndrome in the program. Zackery's hobbies include drawing, painting, acting, dancing, tattoos, superheroes, hockey (Nashville Predators), and swimming. He also loves CrossFit and is proud to have designed a tee shirt for FSFIT. He competed in the 2021 CrossFit Open, finishing at #22 in the division for males with intellectual disabilities. He wants to own a coffee shop someday.



Harry Potter - Rickey Hordge - Rickey lives in Memphis, TN and has always loved to make art. He loves drawing, painting, graphic design and is hoping to start working with clay soon! He loves to create things and is very proud of his work! He lives in a family model home and would love to go to art school someday.

See Paintings, Photography, and More by Artists with Disabilities at the Frist Art Museum's exhibition *The Power of Resilience*

Entering the Frist Art Museum, visitors are now greeted by an inspiring exhibition in the Conte Community Arts Gallery featuring works by more than 80 adult artists with disabilities who are served by five social service agencies in Middle Tennessee. Titled [*The Power of Resilience*](#), the exhibition includes individual and collaborative artworks. It will be on view in the always-free Conte Community Arts through April 1.

These creations are all themed around the notion

of resilience—the ability to withstand, adjust to, or recover from life's difficulties, often by overcoming fear, isolation, and insecurity. "By focusing on the artists' unique abilities and boundless creativity, this exhibition promotes growth, healing, and empathy among all people," says exhibition curator and community engagement director Shaun Giles.

Guided by teaching artists, groups at

- AbleVoices;
- Borderless Arts;
- Friends Life Community;
- Healing Arts Project, Inc.; and
- Metro Parks disABILITIES

made works of art that address themes of identity, visibility, healing, and more.

To create greater community and personal self-awareness, **AbleVoices** encouraged its photographers with disabilities to reflect on and express their challenges, interests, and strengths.

In a collaborative project, participating artists from **Borderless Arts** created an emotionally expressive abstract work focused on both devastation and revitalization using fabric shapes, textures, and colors.

Friends Life Community artists constructed a collaborative quilt of symbolic images sewn alongside their own portraits to celebrate both community and individuality.

Responding to the themes of human nature and mother nature, the paintings and collages made by **Healing Arts Project, Inc.**, represent interpretations of personal resilience, regeneration, and the four seasons.

In three projects, participating artists from **Metro Parks disABILITIES** created layered paintings, torn and reassembled watercolors, and mixed-media works to symbolize post-traumatic growth and recovery.



Graham, Bradley, Nic, Galo, Randle, Sean, Sam, Grant, Rebekah, Isabel, and Sarah. Powerful As I Am Community Quilt, 2023. Relief prints and silk screen on fabric. Courtesy of the artists

About the Organizations

AbleVoices is a nonprofit arts organization whose mission is to amplify the voices of people with disabilities through the powerful medium of photography and, in doing so, foster more inclusive communities. They teach photography to youth and adults with disabilities as a means for self-expression, as a creative outlet, and for disability advocacy. Their flagship program, Photography for Self-Expression, is offered in schools, community organizations, and virtually.

Healing Arts Project, Inc. (HAPI) provides artistic opportunities for persons in mental health and addiction recovery to promote healing, community awareness, and inclusion. HAPI exists to fill a gap in recovery and rehabilitation services by providing free art classes taught by professional artists, art exhibition and publication opportunities, and outreach events. These opportunities help participants express and externalize their personal struggles as they create art to tell their stories. HAPI serves approximately five hundred individuals in mental health and addiction recovery each year.

The **Metro Parks disABILITIES** Programs provides individuals with Intellectual and Developmental disABILITIES (IDD) and their families and caregivers opportunities for sports, arts, outdoor activities, cultural experiences, and social interactions. It is the mission of the Metro Parks disABILITIES Programs to provide every citizen of Nashville and Davidson County with IDDs with an equal opportunity for safe recreational and cultural activities.

The mission of **Friends Life Community** is to provide opportunities for teenagers and adults with developmental disabilities to grow personally, develop socially, and be active members of the community. Their Immersive Weekday Program provides person-driven support through group learning and community-based classes. Participants choose classes in life skills, service learning and employment, and visual and performing arts. The process of self-expression and discovery is a way for these artists to communicate who they are and what is important to them. They connect with others through sharing their artwork in exhibitions and working collaboratively. Friends Life artists are professional artists and inspire others who work alongside them.

Borderless Arts Tennessee (formerly VSA Tennessee),

established in 2001, is a nonprofit organization committed to inclusive and accessible arts programs for people with disabilities, enhancing educational curriculum, enriching creative expression, empowering career development, and encouraging community engagement. The organization works with people of all ages with any form of disability. Borderless Arts Tennessee is the current Governor's Arts Award recipient for arts leadership.

Editor's Note: You'll see each of these organizations represented throughout this issue of *Breaking Ground*, in both the articles and in the individual works participants submitted for us to feature. We are so proud to have such a strong and interconnected community of artists with disabilities in our state.

For current hours and additional information, visit FristArtMuseum.org or call 615.244.3340.



Bria Spurlock. *I Have a Good Mommy and a Good Step Mommy!*, 2023. Watercolor and ink on textured paper. Courtesy of the artist.

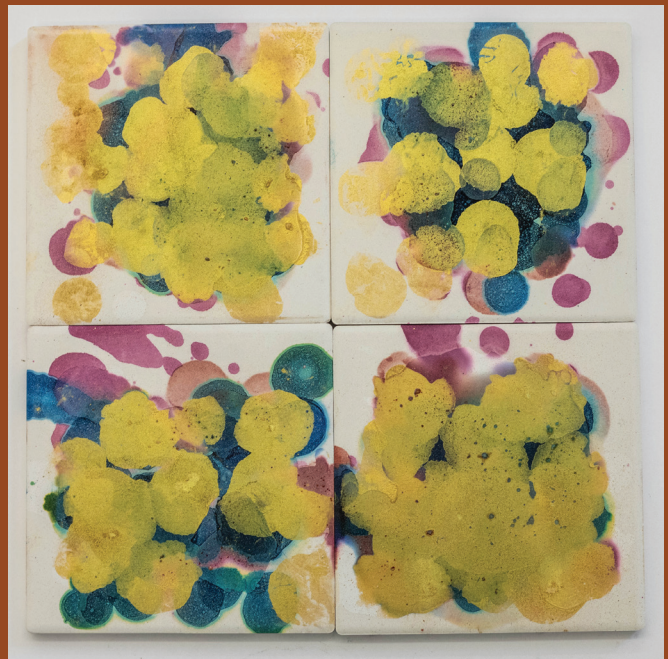
...Frist Art Museum's exhibition *The Power of Resilience* Continued



Jan Batts, Ashley Cooper, Samantha Decosta, Araya Favez, Mary Gadsey, Cindy Gossett, Tamira Halman, Shamblin Kiehbarth, Daniel Porter, Raymond Kinnard, Rita Nyland, Marilyn Richardson, Sara Tidd, and Jayla Vaughn. *Mother Nature, Fall, 2023*. Mixed media on canvas. Courtesy of the artists



Hope McKee. *Nashville Devastation, 2023*. Fabric collage. Courtesy of the artist



William. *Untitled*. Alcohol, acrylic, and ink on ceramic tile. Courtesy of the artist



Sweet Band Alabama - Bryant Welch - I live in Franklin, TN, and I am a young man on the autism spectrum. Photography creates meaningful connections between people, whether they are friends or someone who sees my favorite photos. I take my camera most everywhere, because beauty and light are always there if you have a keen eye and a desire to find! *I love finding interesting objects to photograph. My work is a reflection of things and places that captivate my imagination.*



Peaceful Joy - Jennifer Grayson - Jennifer Grayson is a McMinnville native. *“Creating art provides me the opportunity to express myself and release my emotions.”*



Polar Bear in a Sweater - Eric Peterson - Acrylic painting. Eric is 31 years old and lives in Cleveland. He is proud to work at Home Depot and be a student at Trousdale School. He loves playing kickball and football, building racecars for Pinewood Derby, cooking new recipes, and making new friends.

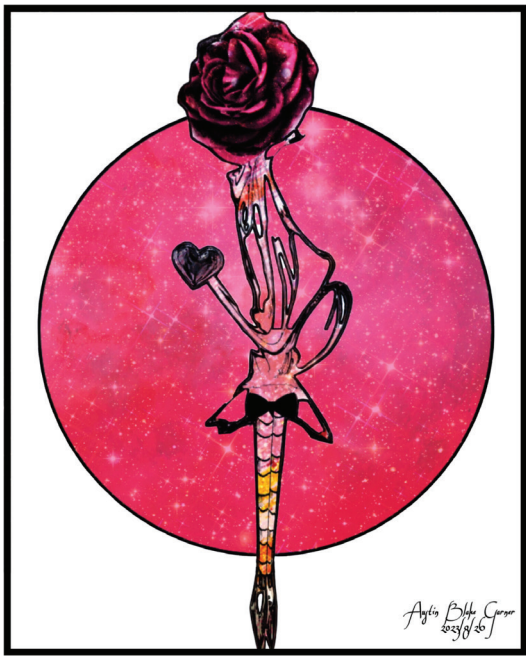
Pansies - Mary Margaret - Mary Margaret loves to make work about flowers. Her work is largely about the love between Mary Margaret and her sisters. It is whimsical, too, incorporating lots of color and energized mark making. The flowers are also an ode to self-love and empowerment.



SCAN THE QR CODE TO WATCH THE FRIENDS LIFE COMMUNITY'S DANCE ENSEMBLE PRESENTATION OF "BIG POWER IN ME"

Friends Life Community's Dance Ensemble is a part of the Advocacy Through The Arts program, where performers find their voice, share their stories, and connect with others through a shared experience. This Ensemble has toured and performed all over Nashville for several years, breaking down the walls of disability stigmas, inspiring others to look within, and providing dignified entertainment through their original creations.

Ten adults with disabilities from Friends Life Community created and performed a devised movement piece that examines disability as a counterculture through the eyes of artists redefining how society perceives them. Original choreography is born from techniques found in sounding, authentic movement, improvisation, ballet, meditation, and individual styles. This piece was initially performed as part of the 2023 Kindling Arts Festival, a collection of short dance works examining the complex relationship between the body and mind and how that affects societal perceptions.



Olly Olly Oxen Free - Austin Garner - Even though we are all aware that our lives are in disarray, the message of art endures and patiently awaits its next viewer. I rarely consider art in any other context than the ideas it evokes during its creation, so it's really difficult for me to describe what it means to me. I also enjoy using a mix of traditional paint with digital elements.



Sensory Overload - Jillian DeGrie - Jillian DeGrie is an art student studying at MTSU. They were diagnosed with autism and ADHD as an adult and use their art as a vessel to make their research and experience with invisible disability approachable and accessible to those who do not experience it. *"These pieces were part of my honors thesis called "Breaking the Stigma around Autism: an Interactive Art Exhibition." This was a solo art show meant to educate people on neurodivergence honestly in an effort to promote acceptance and discussion. More info can be found at <https://jilliandegrieart.square.site/thesis-exhibition>*

The Beauty of Night

by Sylvia Bonham

Darkness falls along with the stars

The river shimmers in the moonlight

The frogs and insects sing their song of night

The world listens to the galaxy's lullaby

And all creatures say

"We shall wait for morning and all its beauty"

The Beauty of Night - Sylvia Bonham - I am 12 years old and have lived in Nashville my entire life. I am dyslexic and autistic. I like to draw and write poetry. I like to make art because it makes me feel relaxed, and it makes me feel like I can do anything. I wrote the poem because I love the darkness and the moonlight.



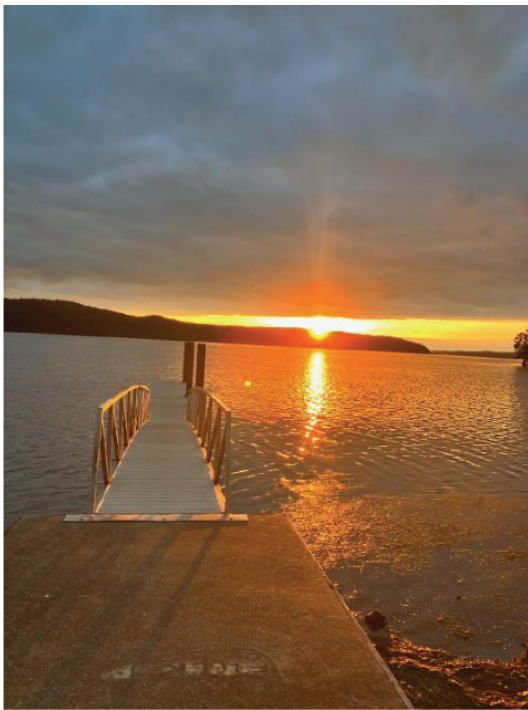
Àbò (Caring Hands)

- Chizenum Uriri -

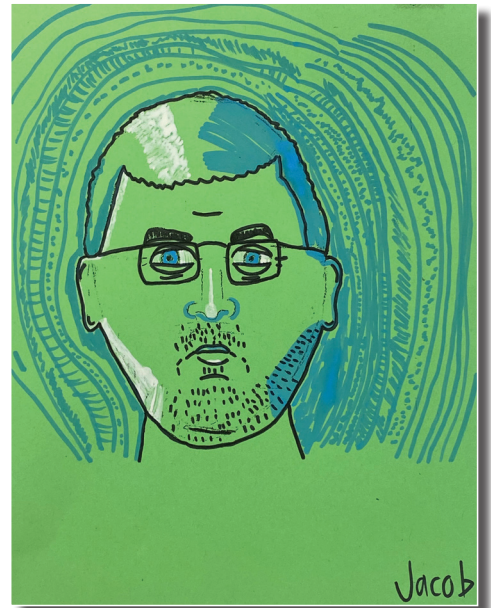
Chizenum is a 21-year-old autistic who uses art to self-calm. Chizenum lives in Antioch and loves creating abstract artwork using crayons and paint. *The titles are determined by providing the artist with options of what we thought they were since, the artist has limited expressive communication.*



The Exceptional Bean Diorama - Thomas Golz - Thomas Golz, 20, of Cookeville is an autistic young man who began creating dollhouses in 2019 when schools closed for COVID. He needed something to do with all his time and worked on dollhouse, diorama, and book nook kits. Then he was asked to create a diorama for his employer at The Exceptional Bean and with his mother, Jennifer Gray, to organize and assist him, a new small business was born - Small World Dioramas. Commissions for dioramas by local businesses include Cream City, Ralph's Donuts, Big O Donuts, Cigi's Boutique, The Glass Tangerine, First National Bank of Tennessee, and many more. Thomas is a proud member of Art Round Tennessee and loves making people happy with his tiny worlds that leave a big impact on the community.



Sunset Tennessee River - Ragan Patterson - I'm an 18 year old junior at East Hickman High School I have Fragile X Syndrome . I love taking landscape photos. I love our beautiful country and love capturing the beauty of it.



Facial Feature - Jacob Atkins. Marker self-portrait drawing - Jacob is 24 years old and a resident of Chattanooga. He attends Trousdale School and also works in facility services at the school. One of Jacob's greatest joys is drawing cartoons. Jacob says: **"It really helps me focus on what I'm doing. When I was a kid, I learned how to draw from cartoonist Bruce Blitz. I can draw anything, from flowers to people to animals to all sorts of things from my imagination. I'll be looking forward to the future for more things to draw that will pop into my head!"**

Morgan Vice
Morgan is a 30 year old adult on the autism spectrum. She enjoys painting seasonal acrylic scenes on her window each month. She also enjoys cowriting and performing original songs with her mom about things that are important to her.



LISTEN TO "GO AWAY RAIN!"

The song is written and recorded by Morgan and Tammy Vice

Free Play: Thesis Project to Documentary - to Life Path

By Alex Astrella, documentary filmmaker, Blu Star Productions

Editor's Introduction: Karen West of Gallatin, Tenn., is a former Governor-appointed member of our Council. She is also a 2015 graduate of our Partners in Policymaking® Leadership Institute. That's how we heard about *Free Play*, a documentary released in 2023 telling the story of Gallatin Miracle Park – an inclusive playground born from Karen's vision and passion. We connected with the film's director, Alex Astrella, who kindly agreed to share about his experience making *Free Play* – and the impact the film has had on his life.

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Free Play started as my master's thesis project to attain my M.Ed. in Special Education at Vanderbilt University. I was fascinated by the idea of the Gallatin Miracle Park when I first heard about it through a local news story.

While living in California for most of my life, I had never seen an inclusive playground with as grand a scale as the Gallatin Miracle Park. With my background in filmmaking, I knew I wanted to create a piece to shed light on the incredible story behind the park's creation.

That is how I connected with the families in the film:

- Karen and Michael West,
- Nathan and Amy Nixon,
- Heather and Liz Broadway, and
- Lisa Langford
- Jodi Mahalo.

Free Play documents the perseverance of Karen West to create Middle TN's largest all inclusive park. It also underscores the value that the park provides to the community through showing how families from various backgrounds come together as one while at the park.

I was lucky enough to find local freelance filmmakers who helped make *Free Play* the highest caliber film it could be. During the filmmaking, I used my knowledge from my coursework at Vanderbilt to ensure the documentary subjects were treated and represented fairly. I was thankful to have access to Vanderbilt's vast resources to present why all-inclusive playgrounds like



Alex chats with attendees at the *Free Play* premiere.

the Gallatin Miracle Park are instrumental in aiding the development of children of all abilities.

I learned invaluable lessons while researching, filming, and editing *Free Play* that will forever be a part of me going forward. It also made me appreciate the power that playgrounds like the Gallatin Miracle Park have to develop the creative mind. I am so grateful to everyone who was involved in making *Free Play* a dream turned reality.

I was diagnosed with autism myself when I was 2 years old. I received behavioral therapy from ages 2-7. I used to repress and disguise my disability, as I was ashamed of being autistic. However, through projects like *Free Play*, I now cherish my autism – it's a superpower.

That awareness is what led me to want to pursue a master's in special education. I wanted to give back to the community and individuals that gave me the keys to unlock that superpower when I was a child.

In making *Free Play*, the sheer joy that the kids express when playing at the Miracle Park is palpable. Seeing the subjects of our film have so much fun brought me back to my childhood. I remembered how many precious moments I had on the playground myself as a youth. To see children of all abilities interacting and playing together at the Gallatin Miracle Park was heartwarming. It inspired me to want to make *Free Play* more than just



a thesis project, but a film that will hopefully benefit the disability community in the years to come.

The joy I felt while on set of *Free Play* also inspired me to want to make an impact beyond producing my own content. This led to the formation of my production company, Blu Star Productions, in November 2022. The mission of Blu Star Productions is to empower and recognize the creations of neurodivergent/disabled artists across the globe. In addition to *Free Play* being the production company's first official film, Blu Star Productions is also developing an ever-growing roster of disabled filmmakers from around the world. By creating films like *Free Play*, Blu Star Productions will change the stigma of the supposed "limitations" of those with disabilities.

Readers can watch the film by messaging me directly for a private screening link.

To learn more about *Free Play* and Blu Star Productions, readers can find us on instagram @blustarproductions. We are always looking for people to reach out at our website www.blustarproductions.com , where Blu Star Production's other films and roster members can be found. You can also email me directly at alex@blustarproductions.com.

Alex Astrella is a documentary filmmaker based out of Nashville, TN. Through his work and production company Blu Star Productions, he aims to advocate for disabled creators around the globe.



Tennessee Council on Developmental Disabilities

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Room with a View - Susan Turner - Susan is a 53-year-old woman with Down syndrome. She has been a student at Trousdale School since it opened in 2005, and she is very proud of her longevity at Food City, where she has worked as a bagger for 18 years. Her hobby is painting personalized cards for her friends' birthdays. This painting was created during a class study of Surrealism. It is mixed media - collage and acrylic painting.



Council on Developmental Disabilities

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

Tennessee Council on Developmental Disabilities, Authorization No. 344067, September 2023. 21,600 copies. This public document was promulgated at a cost of \$0.74 per copy.

