

'I am me' exhibit spotlights talents of artists diagnosed with autism

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RIGHT: Mikaela Scheldt's 'Self Portrait' is one of the pieces in the I Am Me: Artists and Autism. The show at the FSU Museum of Fine Arts is running as a part of the many Seven Days of Opening Nights events. The exhibit features pieces of art from a variety of different mediums. / Glenn Beil/Tallahassee Democrat

I am Me: Artists and Autism

Madison Hongyee loves art.

As her mother, Jennifer, explains it, “If she’s not eating, sleeping or in therapy — she’s doing some form of art.”

But art is not just a simple hobby to pass the time for the 10-year-old girl from Fort Walton, her mother added.

“This is how she communicates,” she explained about Madison, who was diagnosed with autism at two years old.

“She was the poster child for autism — not talking or making eye contact and rocking back and forth in front of people,” Hongyee

added, explaining that when Madison turned four she started drawing endlessly with markers, eventually peppering in moments with Play Doh.

One of Madison’s most treasured works, a Play Doh sculpture of her parents embracing, can be seen at the Museum of Fine Arts on Florida State University campus. It’s one of 30 works in the “I am Me: Artists and Autism” exhibit running as part of Seven Days of Opening Nights.

The exhibit opens, Friday and will run through March 31. On Feb. 19, there will be an opening reception at the exhibit, which will also feature live performances — poetry readings, dancing and instrumental performances — by other artists who also have autism.

All of the artists participating in the exhibit are clients from the Center for Autism and Related Disabilities (CARD), a part of the FSU College of Medicine’s Autism Institute, said Allison Leatzow, FSU CARD autism consultant. CARD, a resource for individuals with autism and their families, serves 18 counties with two satellite offices in Panama City and Pensacola.

“Many times we are a family’s first resource when their child has been diagnosed with Autism Spectrum Disorder,” said Susan Baldino, FSU CARD volunteer and member of the CARD constituency board, whose son has also been a client at CARD for 16 years. “We consult with them on what it means to them and their family, strategies and provide contacts in the community for various services.”

“We work with individuals of all ages that may be more affected by autism and will require a lifetime of support to those that are mildly affected and require minimal supports,” she added. “With teens we can assist with transition to adulthood concerns. If it’s an adult that has been diagnosed, we can work directly with them to develop strategies to manage themselves in the social world — college, living independently and working.”

Autism, considered one of the fastest growing serious developmental disabilities in the U.S., affects one in 88 people — affecting boys more frequently, with a ratio of one in 54, Leatzow said.

Some of the aspects of autism that are addressed are managing behavioral issues, sleep and eating difficulties, toileting difficulties, how to utilize technology, as well as assisting with promoting communication, creating visual supports and enhancing academics, she added. CARD also works with schools, community organizations, businesses and the medical community to provide consultations.

Stephen Johnson, 32, local attorney, was diagnosed with autism two years ago.

“It was life changing — a paradigm shift,” he said, also participating in the art exhibit displaying two of his photographs, explaining that CARD helped him to understand what autism really is.

“I had a lot of misunderstandings,” he added. “I have a psychology degree and I didn’t know what autism was. There are a lot of social rules for someone (with ASD). All these things that happened in my life that I thought were just incidents I realize were because of autism.”

Johnson, along with others are happy to have the opportunity to show their talents and how they express themselves artistically.

“I just really wanted to participate,” said Matthew Cravener, 18, who was diagnosed with autism at age 10. “It isn’t a drawback being autistic — others who are not autistic may think it’s a drawback, but that’s their loss. And that’s the message (the organizers) are trying to get out about autism — it may be a disability but we’re not held back by it.”