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## Arts of Life: A Place for Artists to Participate and Engage

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## Arts of Life: A Place for Artists to Participate and Engage

### Abstract

Arts of Life is an innovative, Chicago-based day program where artists with and without disabilities have the opportunity to participate in artwork. It was created out of an identified need for individuals with a developmental disability to foster community engagement in artistic endeavors. Arts of Life has its foundation in four core values: inspiring artistic expression, building community, promoting self-respect, and developing independence. It bases its programming on these values, which help to maintain a collective environment that promotes artistic freedom for all individuals.

### Keywords

day program, occupation, occupational engagement

### Credentials Display

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“We are an art collective, a community of like-minded artists. We make decisions together and have an equal voice.”

I recently had the opportunity to speak with Hilary Marshall, studio manager of the Arts of Life Inc., North Shore studio location, after I had great fun accompanying an artist on a tour of the facility. Marshall was describing the inclusive, equitable environment that Arts of Life endorses for all artists.

A Chicago-based day program where artists with and without disabilities have the opportunity to participate in artwork, Arts of Life has its foundation in four core values: inspiring artistic expression, building community, promoting self-respect, and developing independence. It bases its programming on these values, which help to maintain a collective environment that promotes artistic freedom for all individuals.

### **The Program**

The innovative model for Arts of Life was created out of a need for individuals with a developmental disability to foster community engagement in artistic endeavors. Denise Fisher is the cofounder and executive director. She identified the need for this type of creative growth during her 10 years of experience in residential services for individuals with developmental disabilities. Her first collaboration with an artist, Veronica Cuculich, was a great success. Eventually, along with 11 additional artists, Arts of Life Inc. was established. It now has two locations, one each in Chicago and Glenview, with a total of 59 artists.

To become an Arts of Life artist, an individual must be at least 18 years old, have a

sustained interest in art, and use the materials safely. Appropriate supportive services are provided for every artist, who must commit to participate in the program at least two days a week. This promotes accountability and encourages everyone to feel they have ownership, helping to maintain it as an art collective. To further promote shared ownership of the space, all artists are responsible for chores, such as washing dishes.

Artists are self-directed while creating their artwork. In collaboration with a staff member, they create goals in each of the four core value areas. Examples have included improving water coloring, becoming familiar with abstract expressionism, improving time management, and participating in marketing. This collaborative goal-setting process improves individual responsibilities while promoting growth for community engagement opportunities.

Along with social engagement with others, an artist’s daily routine includes a variety of art modalities to help maintain engagement in activities throughout the day. For example, the artists in Van Go Go, the house band, practice every Tuesday afternoon. Van Go Go makes appearances at local community spots, such as coffee shops, and it recently released a CD. Supplemental classes suggested by the artists are offered in the afternoon; so far, they have included photography, drama, and dancing. Exhibitions of the artists’ work can be seen at the Arts of Life locations and in the community.

The cover art for this issue of *The Open Journal of Occupational Therapy* reflects the Arts of Life community and social environment. It is a

collective piece made by artists at the North Shore studio location, created during a six-month span. The artists collaborated from the conception to the implementation of the piece, spearheaded by a volunteer who worked twice a week to ensure success. It is made of wood, paint, and markers and currently hangs in the communal space for all artists and visitors to view. The most important aspect of this piece is the meaning and motivation behind the artwork. It represents the four core values that Arts of Life has adopted, and the artists incorporated all four themes in the piece itself.

### The Connection to Occupational Therapy

The work underway at Arts of Life can be linked directly to occupational therapy concepts. Artists are self-directed and have their own unique approaches to their art. Some are process oriented and motivated by tactile and/or proprioceptive input needs when selecting the materials they use. Others are outcome oriented; they focus on creating a specific picture or look. This self-directed approach with an emphasis on goal orientation has a direct relationship to occupation. As Crabtree (1998) noted, “the unique end, or goal, of occupational therapy is to help persons with performance deficits of any kind make and express meaning through organized human performance, which I call occupation” (p. 205). The artwork of these artists, created in an organized manner, is an example of this definition of occupation.

A literature review by Case-Smith and Arbesman (2008) showed parallel themes to the operationalization that occurs at Arts of Life.

Although that study was limited to children with autism spectrum disorder, the interventions Case-

Smith and Arbesman described included sensory-based modalities, relationship-based interactive interventions, and developmental skill-based programs. By allowing Arts of Life artists to select different tactile or proprioceptive stimuli in a daily structured routine, they have the opportunity to self-modulate. With sensory modulation, these artists have the opportunity to regulate their sensory systems and better prepare their bodies for maintaining attention and participating in tasks that include social interaction.

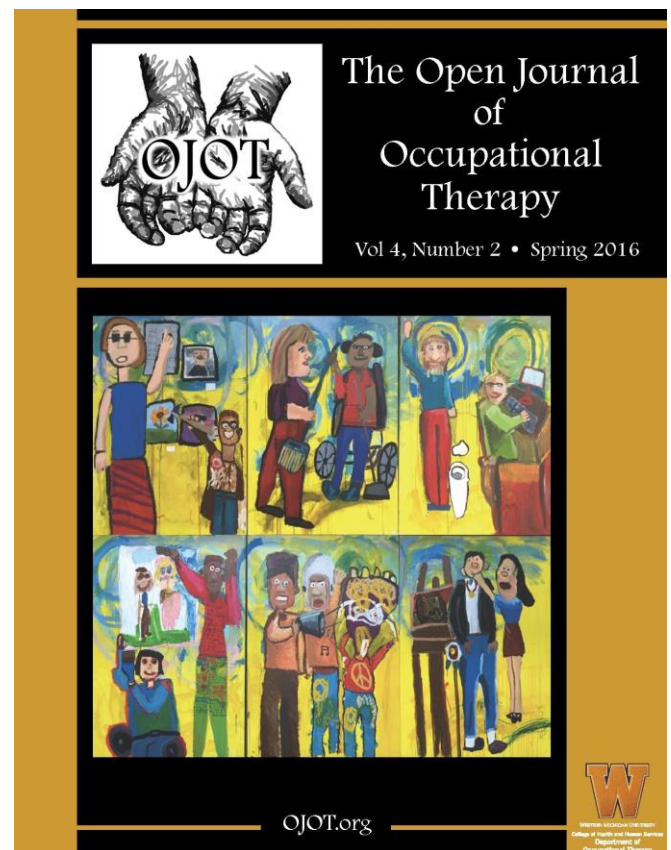


Figure 1. Cover of OJOT Vol 4, No 2

Historically, autonomy has not always been a choice for individuals attending day programs. However, promoting individual choice and decision making is related to the core values of Arts of Life. A study conducted by LaMore and Nelson (1993)

found that individuals of the aged 24 to 77 years with mental disabilities were more likely to engage in artwork when it was a choice rather than an assignment. The choices Arts of Life provides promote the artists' engagement in meaningful activities that are intrinsically driven. This aligns directly with occupational therapy concepts. The artists are participating in a meaningful activity, which ultimately promotes overall well-being.

Engagement in purposeful occupation is another central theme that drives both Arts of Life and occupational therapy practice. The occupational therapy practice framework of the American Occupational Therapy Association (AOTA) states, "Achieving health, well-being, and participation in life through engagement in occupation is the overarching statement that describes the domain and process of occupational therapy in its fullest" (AOTA, 2014, p. S4). Arts of Life promotes this by providing individuals with the opportunity to engage in a meaningful activity of artwork, which again ultimately increases their well-being.

Finally, a phenomenological study conducted by Mahoney, Roberts, Bryze, and Parker Kent (2015) sought to identify what engagement in occupation feasibility entailed. Individuals with intellectual disabilities from a community-based day program participated in interviews and observations. The study found three themes in participants' performance that reflected occupational engagement: doing activity/initiating activity, expressing positive affect, and showing focused attention. These themes were apparent during my visit to Arts of Life. The artists actively

participated in making art, they laughed and smiled frequently, and they showed sustained attention at their workspaces.

For example, during my tour I interviewed one of the artists, Danny. He brought a painting he had just completed to the interview, being careful not to get paint on the furniture. He smiled throughout the interview, beaming joy when he spoke of creating his artwork. Danny received occupational therapy services when he was younger and has been an artist at Arts of Life for more than three years. He takes pride in performing his chores and belongs to Van Go Go. He also works at a local coffee shop, Perk Café. Danny is just one of the broad range of individuals at Arts of Life who are known by their individual artistic preferences and personalities, not by a diagnosis.

As Hilary Marshal stated when I left, "The overall mission of Arts of Life is a multifaceted commitment to the value of art making as a growth opportunity for everyone involved, for people with and without disabilities."

For more information about Arts of Life, please visit: <http://artsoflife.org/>

For a video showcasing a typical day for Danny, please visit: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-xwq36-7ncI&feature=youtu.be>

For Danny's previous blog post, please visit: <http://artsoflife.org/blog/north-shore-meet-artist-danny-frownfelter-0>

Visit the Occupation and the Artist Gallery to view a video and learn more: [http://scholarworks.wmich.edu/ojot\\_occupationandartist/](http://scholarworks.wmich.edu/ojot_occupationandartist/)

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