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Nurturing Personal Capacities Through Engagement in Art

Jennifer K. Fortuna

Grand Valley State University - USA, jennifer.fortuna@wmich.edu

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Nurturing Personal Capacities Through Engagement in Art

Abstract

Andy Wunderlin, an artist based in Vicksburg, MI, provided the cover art for the Spring 2022 edition of *The Open Journal of Occupational Therapy* (OJOT). "Tree with Birds" is a 10" x 13" drawing made from colored pencil (see Figure 1). Andy's style is uniquely photorealistic. His work involves meticulous attention to detail. Each piece takes between 6 months and 2 years to complete. For Andy, drawing provides a powerful source of motivation and purpose. Art has played an important role in the development of Andy's personal capacities and potential.

Keywords

Occupational Therapist, Occupational Therapy, Art, Drawing, Autism, Andy Wunderlin

Credentials Display

Jennifer Fortuna, PhD, OTR/L

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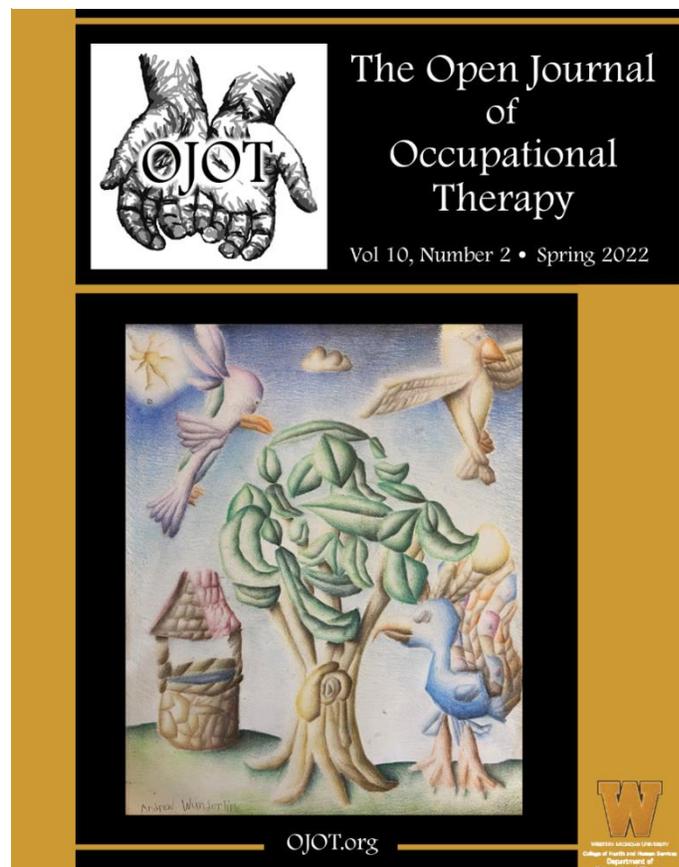
Andy Wunderlin is a kind and thoughtful person who loves to please others. Andy faced several challenges early in life. He was born with a visual impairment that limits his usable vision to the central visual field in one eye. As a child, Andy was diagnosed with autism spectrum disorder (ASD). This diagnosis led to challenges associated with behavior and communication. Supportive family and friends have nurtured Andy's artistic abilities. Art has played an important role in the development of Andy's personal capacities and potential.

ASD is a developmental disability characterized by persistent challenges with social communication and interaction and restricted interests or repetitive behaviors (Centers for Disease Control, 2022). Autism is considered a spectrum disorder because skills and abilities may range from severely impaired to gifted. Many people with autism struggle with communication, but they are skilled in other areas, such as art. In the book *Drawing Autism* (2014), author Jill Mullin celebrates the creative individuality of artists on the autism spectrum. In the foreword, Temple Grandin describes three types of specialized autistic minds: visual thinkers, pattern thinkers, and word specialized minds. Artistic skills and abilities differ based on the type of specialized mind. For example, the art of visual thinkers is often photorealistic. Pattern thinking is a more abstract form of visual thinking. The artistic style of pattern thinkers is more abstract and impressionist. According to Grandin, some pattern thinkers have visual processing problems that change their art in beautiful ways (Mullin, 2014). Finally, word specialized minds are often good with words but not interested in art. Grandin believes that regardless of the type of specialized mind, the skills and abilities of artists with autism need to be nurtured. Andy is a young man with autism whose artistic ability was nurtured by family and friends. Engaging in art helped Andy develop skills and abilities in other areas of life.

Andy, an artist based in Vicksburg, MI, provided the cover art for the Spring 2022 edition of *The Open Journal of Occupational Therapy* (OJOT). "Tree with Birds" is a 10" x 13" drawing made from colored pencil (see Figure 1). Andy's style is uniquely photorealistic. His work involves meticulous attention to detail. Each piece takes between 6 months and 2 years to complete. For Andy, drawing provides a powerful source of motivation and purpose. Art has played an important role in the development of Andy's personal capacities and potential.

When Andy was 20, his parent passed away unexpectedly. Unable to live alone, Andy moved in with his aunt and uncle, Brian and Shannon Penny. They enrolled him in the Kalamazoo Regional Educational Service Agency (KRESA) Young Adult Program. Andy took classes at KRESA for 6 years. One of his classes was art. "Andy's interest in art was fostered when he enrolled at KRESA," said Shannon. Research has shown visual arts education and

Figure 1
Cover Art for OJOT, Vol 10, No 2, Spring 2022



exhibition promotes self-esteem and social communication skills in children with ASD (Cevirgen et al., 2018). “The transition to KRESA was a huge step in Andy’s development and love for art,” said Shannon. “Tree” was Andy’s first drawing (see Figure 2). Art has become an essential part of Andy’s daily routine. He spends 4 hr drawing every day. According to Wilcock (1993), one function of engagement in meaningful occupations is to exercise personal capacities that enable humans to flourish. Personal capacities are rooted in human potential. With each drawing, Andy revealed his potential as an artist.

Through art classes at KRESA, Andy continued developing his artistic capacities. Over time, his style evolved from straightforward to photorealistic. Andy incorporates light and shadow to add dimension to his drawings. His use of color and line create a unique texture that appears both soft and pixelated. “Andy likes to make his drawings look computer generated,” said Shannon. His work involves meticulous attention to detail. “Underwater Scene” is a 10” x 13” drawing made from colored pencil (see Figure 3). Andy recently tried watercolor painting. Although he was able to produce a finished product much faster, Andy prefers drawing over painting. Based on Grandin’s examples of specialized autistic minds, Andy’s artistic skills and abilities most closely align with visual thinking (Mullin, 2014). While many photorealists depend heavily on photographs, Andy’s inspiration comes from images in his mind. “I think about it; then I draw it,” he said. “I like that I can see something and draw it exactly how it is.”

Andy enjoys giving his drawings to family and friends. For Andy, art provides a powerful source of motivation and purpose. “When I am drawing, I feel grateful to be an artist and to make drawings for people,” he said. According to Yerxa (1998), “The human spirit for activity is actualized, in a healthy way, through engagement in occupation: self-initiated, self-directed activity that is productive for the person (even if the product is fun) and contributes to others” (p. 412). Engaging in art has empowered Andy to develop life skills in other areas, such as communication and social participation. In 2021, he had an art show at an ice cream shop in

Figure 2
“Tree” by Andy Wunderlin



Figure 3
“Underwater Scene” by Andy Wunderlin



Kalamazoo, MI. Andy hosted a meet-and-greet where he spoke to community members who came to see his work. “Andy has such a sense of accomplishment and pride in his artwork,” said Shannon. “This experience allowed him to have conversations and speak with strangers that he would not have been able to otherwise.” For people with autism, visual arts offer alternative systems of meaning and communication (Furniss, 2008; Roth, 2020).

Andy’s favorite subjects to draw include scenes from nature (e.g., trees and birds), fruits and vegetables, and pawn pieces from board games. According to Grandin, people with autism often become fixated on their favorite things and draw them over and over again (Mullin, 2014). Therefore, artists with autism need to be directed. To address this, Grandin suggests encouraging the artist to draw something related to the subject of interest. For example, drawing a bird’s nest in the tree. Taking regular art classes at KRESA provided the direction Andy needed to continue developing his artistic abilities.

Brian played an important role in fostering Andy’s creativity. He began incorporating Andy’s interests to engage him in creative projects. For example, Andy has always held strong admiration for Mr. Rogers. “I like that Mr. Rogers is a nice guy,” he said. In 2009, Brian and Andy created a short film entitled “Mr. Andy’s Neighborhood.” The script resembled the show *Mister Rogers’ Neighborhood*. In the film, Andy plays the role of Mr. Rogers while Brian portrays Mr. McFeely and X the Owl. In the opening scene, Andy sings the song “Won’t You Be My Neighbor” while donning a red cardigan and house shoes. Soon, Mr. McFeely appears at the door with a speedy delivery. Andy continues engaging with the audience by reading a book. The film ends with a visit to the Neighborhood of Make Believe, where Andy encounters X the Owl. Andy and Brian invested a lot of time in the film. “The video took several months to edit, but not as long as doing my art,” said Andy. In addition to Mr. Rogers, Andy greatly admires Bob Ross. “He is my favorite artist,” said Andy. “I like that he’s an artist like me, and he’s a nice guy like Mr. Rogers.”

Andy lived with Brian and Shannon for 15 years. With support from family, he moved into an apartment. While at home, Andy enjoys taking walks, reading books, watching movies, and working on jigsaw puzzles. He plans to continue making drawings that he can give to family and friends. Andy’s favorite drawing is a self-portrait he created at KRESA (see Figure 4). His goal for the future is to draw portraits and give them away. Through art, Andy continues to reveal his true potential.

Figure 4

Photo of Andy Wunderlin Holding a Self-Portrait



View more of Andy’s art work in the OJOT gallery:
https://scholarworks.wmich.edu/ojot_occupationandartist/38/

View Andy’s film, Mr. Andy’s Neighborhood:
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=trDW-RDgKNE>

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