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artWorks: Art as Occupation

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Abstract
A collaborative effort from various artists at MRC artWorks located in Kalamazoo, MI contributed to the cover art for the Winter 2024 issue of the Open Journal of Occupational Therapy (OJOT). MRC Industries is a non-profit organization that focuses on supporting individuals with developmental disabilities, cognitive or emotional impairments or illnesses, and people who have experienced traumatic brain injuries. One particular program has become a staple in the Kalamazoo community – MRC artWorks, a professional working art studio for adults with disabilities to learn skills, both physical and emotional, through art instruction and art-making.

Keywords
MRC Industries, MRC artWorks, artWorks, disability, occupation, Brittney Young, Kali Cooper, Madeleine Dirette, Ashley Vosburgh, Bridget Fox

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There is a local art studio and retail shop located in Kalamazoo, MI. On entering the doors, it is evident that something incredible is happening within its walls. Artists are buzzing with conversation, instructors are making their rounds to answer questions and provide pointers, music is playing, and people are laughing. As a patron, you get to experience the joy and energy flowing not only from the paint brushes but through the air. The artists will get up from their seats to say hello and eagerly show you their work on the retail side; they exude pride in their accomplishments and hope you see the beauty in their pieces as well. This unique and special place is part of MRC Industries.

MRC Industries is a non-profit organization located in Kalamazoo, MI, that focuses on supporting individuals with developmental disabilities, cognitive or emotional impairments or illnesses, and people who have experienced traumatic brain injuries. The organization ties back to the 1940s and a small school for children with disabilities that was started by concerned parents. Later, the school incorporated to become McKercher Rehabilitation Center before officially taking the name MRC Industries. The organization’s mission is to “encourage and support individuals living with a disability to achieve their fullest potential through employment, skill building, and active community involvement” (MRC Industries, Inc., 2023, para. 1) and ultimately works to empower independence in the lives of the participants and to teach, or refine, necessary skills for community involvement. One particular program has become a staple in the Kalamazoo community, MRC artWorks, a professional working art studio for adults with disabilities to learn physical and emotional skills through art instruction and art-making.

The artWorks storefront is located along Kalamazoo’s historic downtown mall and consists of a large artist studio, art gallery, and retail shop. Shoppers and visitors of the downtown area are welcome to stroll into the shop and have the opportunity to meet the artists creating unique pieces that line the walls and shelves (Figure 2, Figure 3). The art spans a variety of forms, such as paintings, wall hangings, ornaments, scarves, jewelry, and much more. Individual artists make a commission with each sale, allowing them to earn money and feel a sense of accomplishment. Artists are referred to artWorks by case workers from various local agencies, including Integrated Services of Kalamazoo and Kalamazoo Community Mental Health. Artists set personalized goals with their case managers to increase their level of independence with support from the studio instructors. These goals range from socialization, open-mindedness, proactiveness, attention, vocational skills, professional behaviors, personal boundaries, and coping mechanisms. In turn, artists are expected to demonstrate an interest and willingness to learn, engage in the program, and build foundational art skills by exploring new art mediums and techniques and working with patrons and fellow artists. A basic assessment is completed on new participants so their particular curriculum can be developed; this includes a baseline of skills they currently have and what they want to be able to create. Some artists have been
attending for years, while others have moved on to other retail jobs with the skills they cultivated while in the program.

During the COVID-19 shutdown, the program maintained a strong presence in the community through community partnerships and a telehealth program that was offered both in the morning and afternoon. In 2022, the studio resumed normal business practice and quickly returned to capacity. So much so that artWorks expanded into the neighboring suite to allow for a full art gallery and a larger studio space. Currently, there are approximately 30 artists that attend artWorks daily. In November of 2023, artWorks was awarded the Southwest Michigan First’s Chamber Award for Non-Profit of the Year (Southwest Michigan First, 2023), a true testament to the artists' work and the team that supports them.

A dynamic group of five lead the artWorks team is led by. The art studio is led by supervisor Brittney Young and three art instructors: Kali Cooper, Madeleine Dirette, and Ashley Vosburgh. Bridget Fox runs the art gallery and retail shop. Each of these individuals has an immense passion for their work and takes great pride in the accomplishments of the artists. Every person has their own unique story of how they came to be at artWorks, but one thing is a common denominator: they are all honored to witness and celebrate the work the artists complete on a daily basis. They are inspired by the confidence the artists gain with each new technique and each new sale. They thrive on helping the artists achieve their goals and realize their tremendous self-worth and how loved they are in this community and this world.

Brittney (Figure 4) started with artWorks in January 2023 and is a graduate of Western Michigan University (WMU). In 1993, they received their Bachelor of Science with a double emphasis in Art and Anthropology. In 2019, Brittney received a Master of Arts in Educational and Instructional Technology and Design. They returned to school in 2020 to pursue their Master of Arts in Clinical Mental Health Counseling. Brittney said that artWorks is the first place where they have been able to use all of the skills from their educational and career background and that their journey to get to artWorks was very purposeful. Brittney worked as an engraving graphic designer at Promotion Concepts in Kalamazoo when they first learned of artWorks in 2005. In 2006, they started working at MC Sports in the Greater Grand Rapids area; however, in 2017, the company filed for bankruptcy and was liquidated. This is when Brittney returned to WMU for their master’s degree and worked for the university, first as the office coordinator for the TRIO Student Success program, then as the assistant to the director of the School of Music until 2021. They then worked for WMU’s Homer J. Stryker School of Medicine (WMed) program as the administrative assistant in Pathology and as the shipping and receiving coordinator for the accounting department. This was a particularly challenging time because of the impact of COVID-19 on the medical school, and they felt a lack of mental and social support. When they learned of the art studio supervisor opportunity at artWorks, they knew this was where they were meant to be. As Brittney courageously stated,
“art has kept me alive.” Britteny creates the lesson plans, sets the curriculum for developing skills, and hires the art instructors. In addition, they complete all of the ordering for the studio, which includes special mediums for the various commission works (Figure 5) the artists complete.

Madeleine (Figure 6) started with artWorks in November 2021. She graduated from Western Michigan University with her Bachelor of Science in Psychology and a minor in Fine Arts in the Spring of 2021. She is considering returning to school for a Master of Art Therapy as she is very interested in the therapeutic side of what art can do for people who are experiencing various challenges in life. Madeleine has always had a passion for art and knew from age 5 that she wanted to be an art teacher. When she was 16, she was diagnosed with an anxiety disorder and attention-deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD). She stated that she felt a sense of relief in understanding this about herself and that there was a clinical reason why things were more challenging for her than for others. As a result of her personal experiences, she has a unique perspective on empowering others to achieve their goals and stretch beyond what they realize they are capable of doing. This is what makes artWorks meaningful to her. She gets to use her skills and empathy to connect with a wide variety of people from different walks of life to break outside of societal expectations. Madeleine creates a positive, happy, and fun experience for her artists; there is a lot of laughter and encouragement. Working at artWorks has also led to personal growth in the sense of creating and asserting boundaries and helping to solve interpersonal conflicts. In addition, she has seen an improvement of her own art skills. She has been able to learn to appreciate imperfections and how to sketch different scenes or characters quickly to help inspire the artists. In her personal life, she is working on a digital drawing of a bumblebee and enjoys focusing her art on non-traditionally beautiful things, such as insects, moths, and bones.

Ashley graduated from Kalamazoo Community College in Spring 2023 with a General Studies degree, which allows her to bring a wide range of knowledge and experience. Before starting with artWorks in March of 2023, she was the district supervisor of McDonald’s where she gained a lot of leadership experience that has served her well with the artists. She is a problem-solver and quick to think on her feet. She, too, has shared that her personal art skills are becoming more refined. She is learning and exploring new mediums to challenge herself and also learning to sketch quickly. Ashley says that she loves playing with paint all day and that every day is different. All of the artists that come to the studio have different schedules, so the projects and dynamics are ever-changing. Her favorite projects to date are the 26th Street mural and a large yarn embroidery project of a mother and baby whale. She takes great pride in the expansion of where the artists are being showcased and how many artists are commissioned to create
specific pieces. Recently, an artist from artWorks was featured in a Lansing exhibit. These exciting opportunities motivate the studio participants, and watching their confidence grow has inspired Ashley.

The most recent instructor to join the team in April 2023 is Kali. She is a graduate of the graphic design project at Purdue in Ft. Wayne. Before graphic design, she studied music therapy for 3 years. She is able to play many instruments and is a professional flutist. The juxtaposition of art and music has inspired Kali, and she loves to teach the artists that whatever tool they are using it is an extension of themselves. As for the art process, she finds joy in picking out something to create, giving herself permission to have fun with it and knowing that not everything has to be perfect. And, she teaches this to her students through example. When reflecting on what she loves most about artWorks, she stated that the organization gives adults with disabilities an opportunity they would not otherwise have. More importantly, everyone has a unique ability to bond through art, and that is something that is really special. She is most excited about the multimedia pieces and teaching artists how to complete the techniques.

The retail supervisor, Bridget, has been with artWorks since 2020 but has been a patron since 2009. Bridget received her Bachelor of Fine Arts from the Art Institute of Chicago in 1993. From Chicago, she moved to California before returning to the Kalamazoo area to raise her family. She spent the next several years supporting the Kalamazoo art scene, including co-ownership of Bella Patina for 3 years, working as an independent artist, and as docent for the Kalamazoo Institute of Arts. In 2020, when an art instructor position became available at artWorks, she knew the opportunity was meant for her. With her numerous connections in the community, Bridget was able to help cultivate opportunities for artists to gain exposure during COVID-19 when the studio was only allowing approximately six to 10 artists at a time for safety measures. This included wholesale partnerships and collaborations with other organizations to create signature scents or special flavors while featuring various artists on the labels. This also opened the door to having artists featured in other galleries, shops, and stores. In March of 2022, Bridget transitioned from an art instructor to the retail supervisor and continues to serve as a community liaison for the group. She exudes pride as she shares stories of the artists, what so many of them have been able to achieve, and her love for what artWorks values.

Many of the artists had similar sentiments about the program. They are grateful for the support they receive from the instructors and their community. Making art brings them joy and they love being able to share their pieces with the community (Figure 7). The artists come to the program with a wide range of backgrounds, from anxiety to brain injuries to autism. Some live independently, some with family, and others in group homes. One artist stated that he really enjoys the friendships he has made at artWorks and is thankful for the instructors who have helped him with painting, providing tips to improve and sharing with him the “rules” of art. Much of what he has learned at artWorks carries over to two other jobs he holds in the area. Another artist shares that she creates jewelry outside of artWorks to sell, but her favorite thing is paint and learn new skills such as crocheting. She mentions that she is a social butterfly and really loves talking to buyers and friends at the studio. Another artist shares that she has been a part of the artWorks program for 10 years and remembers her first
painting and how she now really enjoys drawing and crocheting. Other artists have completed illustrations for books, have had art featured on coffee mugs, and have had art displayed at various art expositions, both locally and throughout the state. All of the artists have stories to share through their art, and MRC artWorks gives them the platform to shine (Figure 8).

The cover piece (Figure 1) and Figure 9 below are examples of collective group projects that bring together several artists and instructors. There is intentionality in the selection of the design, which empowers all contributors to work collaboratively and effectively to create something beautiful. In addition, group projects highlight the various skills that have been cultivated, both physically and emotionally, by each unique person during their time with the artWorks program. When a group painting or piece is sold, each artist gets a portion of the sale. They celebrate together, which further builds their relationships and self-confidence. MRC artWorks is truly a special place and brings so much to the Kalamazoo community.

References

View more from MRC artWorks in the OJOT Gallery:
https://scholarworks.wmich.edu/ojot_occupationandartist
Follow MRC artWorks on Instagram:
https://www.instagram.com/mrcartworks/
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Art with painting on Kalamazoo’s historic mall, outside of artWorks storefront.
Canvas painting by artWorks artist.