



Member Recognition

2018 MOHR Life Enrichment Awards

Rise's Art Speaks Program

1. How does this program, event or major activity serve individuals effectively and improve their lives, and what makes it exceptional? How is ingenuity used and how has the provider shown an ability to “think outside the box?”

Art Speaks currently serves more than 200 individuals who have mild to severe physical and/or intellectual disabilities through weekly or twice-weekly classes at locations throughout Hennepin and Anoka Counties. Rise began its Art Speaks program in 2008 to complement other services people receive in our Day Training and Habilitation and Adult Day Programs. The program is essential in achieving Rise's vision, which calls for a progressive, supportive, and collaborative environment that fosters meaningful growth and provides opportunities to live a life filled with purpose.

Our program is called Art Speaks because our artists have developed an artistic voice in addition to or in place of an actual voice: art is communication and our artists' messages deserve to be shared. Stacy Gross, Rise's art therapist, guides and encourages program participants to create works of art that express their artistic vision and/or “tell their story.”

To make art-making as accessible and inclusive as possible, Stacy consistently thinks outside the box and she continues to try to find new means, methods, and adaptabilities in order to do so. For example, artists in Art Speaks have created splatter paint art using rubber mallets and cotton circles, impressionistic-like art using microfiber dusters, and used rolling pins with yarn and foam pieces glued to them to roll different patterns onto paper. It is not unusual for the artists in Art Speaks to go weeks without using a paintbrush, but make a variety of interesting abstract art.

Stacy also collaborates with other Rise team members to try to come up with new adaptive techniques to help our artist be independent as possible including the recent purchase of some Instamorph moldable plastic to create different grips and other adaptive solutions.

2. How are people in the program and in the community impacted? What is the history and timeline of the program aspects and how has it been improved? What challenges were overcome?

When Rise first started the program in 2008, we contracted with an artist to conduct Art Speaks sessions. As it became more apparent to us how valuable and effective creating art was for people in our day training and habilitation programs, we hired a fulltime art therapist who could and has taken the program to a whole new level of professionalism.

By participating in art groups and exhibitions, our artists experience the chance to share their ideas and creativity with others. Studies have proven that creating art fosters self-esteem, promotes self-regulation and relaxation, reduces anxiety, increases independence, and helps develop problem-solving and decision-making skills.

Artists who choose to participate in Rise's Art Speaks program do so as a means of embracing what they can do, in a world focused on what they can't. Our program includes artists who need physical support in order to accomplish their artistic vision, artists who are young and artists who are older, artists who choose to communicate the struggles of their disability through their art, and those who simply enjoy art.

People are routinely struck by the beauty, depth and professionalism of the work produced in our Art Speaks program. Fashioned in a range of media— paintings, drawings collages, multi-media and 3-D work—these creations appeal to a broad audience.

Through art groups and exhibitions, our artists experience opportunities to proudly share their work with others. Over the years, Rise artists have had their original works displayed in a number of public and corporate venues throughout the Twin Cities area, including the Powderhorn Art Fair, all Anoka County license bureaus, Blaine City Hall, Hennepin County Government Center, Anoka County Government Center, Dunn Brother Coffeehouses, and the Hennepin County Family Justice Center, as well as office locations of Cummins Power Generation, CommonBond Communities, the Travelers Companies, and Rise.

Artists may also sell their original artwork, notecards, and posters in local businesses and at special events. This further validates their talents as artists, enhancing their feelings of self-worth and independence.

In addition, Art Speaks artists create original pieces of art for our annual Celebrate Rise Fundraising Gala, including table centerpieces, coasters, and calendars, for our guests to take home as a special souvenir of the evening.

3. How are individuals with disabilities involved in making choices (person-centered) in the program (direction, creativity)? How much of the activity is performed by people with disabilities? By volunteers? Staff?

Many of the individuals served in the Art Speaks program have difficulties holding a paintbrush due to partial paralysis. One has severe tremors that actually decline or disappear altogether when she begins painting. One highly talented artist has myasthenia gravis affecting her eye muscles, and must literally prop her eye open to see her canvas. Another, paralyzed from the neck down, uses adaptive technology to create highly acclaimed computer images using a small light mounted on her glasses.

These are people who must overcome tremendous barriers to create art. In many cases, the art they create tells the powerful story of the lives they live overcoming challenges each day. For example, one of our artists painted a spine, with a red line broken halfway down the center to represent his severed spinal cord.

The art-making process is different for each individual based on both one's abilities and one's preferences. Some artists do not have the motor skills to grasp supplies or the muscle strength to support their arm as they create so Stacy or a volunteer will assist. Some can verbally tell you what color they want next, but some cannot. The art-making process then becomes a collaborative experience but effort is made to follow the artist's lead through yes/no questions, ASL, supporting the arm vs. moving the arm, etc.

Additionally, some artists have very specific ideas in mind of what kind of art-making they want to do in that moment; some don't. Art Speaks allows for individuals to try something new; Stacy has artists paint with paint brushes, but she also has them paint with potato smashers, cups, sponges, balloons, cookies cutters, and other tools as a means of having the art-making process be more accessible. Gripping a fly swatter may be easier to grip than a paintbrush -- and it leaves a pretty amazing mark! Art Speaks is an open studio of sorts; specific ideas and art-making processes are available, but it's a choice, one can choose to do something else art-related if that's what one would like to do.

Consider what Brian Hoffman has to say about Art Speaks; his comments certainly echo what so many participants have expressed. “I like to paint because it’s relaxing for me. My first painting of a lighthouse was so good, my mom made notecards of it! She then sold them and donated the proceeds to Rise’s Art Speaks program. All of a sudden I was an artist and I was proud; it felt good.”

Rise has also attracted a growing cadre of more than 20 volunteers who work at each of our locations. They are drawn to the work by the inspiration provided by our artists and the satisfaction of seeing individuals with disabilities overcome tremendous challenges to create works of art.

Katie Dennis, a senior financial analyst for Allianz Life in Golden Valley, is one such volunteer. Katie uses her lunchtime on Mondays to assist Stacy with Art Speaks at our Creative Partnerships South in Bloomington. “I’m not really an artist, but I can be artistic for fun,” Katie said. “What I really love the most is working one-on-one with people and getting to know each person individually.”

4. What do you expect the long-term impact of the program to be and how is it being sustained?

Art Speaks is supported with funding through service fees from Day Training and Habilitation and Adult Day Program. For special projects and exhibit opportunities, Rise seeks additional grant funding.

Art Speaks is a program that is continually recognized by Rise team members as an integral component of our programming. Team members often approach Stacy either before or after art and say that a specific artist needed art that day. The long-term impact of fostering self-esteem, harnessing and expressing creativity, and using art-making as a coping skill is already being felt by our artists in Art Speaks as they continue to choose to make art, both during Art Speaks and on their own time.

Additionally, Art Speaks has added two new businesses in the past two years in which we display and regularly rotate artwork and expect to continue to add more. We are brainstorming ways to continue to grow including an adding online presence, partnerships with professional artists and art

businesses, and more ideas have been discussed and are in the works in order to be launched as future Art Speaks initiatives.

5. How have the ideas or concepts of this program spread and benefited others?

Whenever there is a public display or showing of Art Speaks work, Stacy includes information about the program and the individual artists so viewers can have a total appreciation for the art and how it was created. This is tremendously beneficial in helping to create awareness of the abilities of people who have disabilities as well as help to break down some of the myths and misconceptions some others may have. At Rise's annual fundraising Gala, Rise has unveiled videos that include the diverse work that is done at Rise, including video of Art Speaks artists in action. These videos are then viewable on both Rise's website and Rise's YouTube page as opportunities for others to learn more about Rise and Art Speaks.

The United Way selected Rise as a partner in their "Art for All" initiative where a professional mosaic artist and teacher designed a large-scale mosaic where a number of volunteers came to Rise to work on the mosaic alongside Art Speaks artists, allowing these volunteers a first-hand glimpse at how making art is valued by our artists. And through this connection, we have met several volunteers that came back for other opportunities to volunteer on this project and with Art Speaks in general.

Thanks to our partnership with Cummins Power Generation, the concepts of Art Speaks have been spread across the Atlantic Ocean! Cummins has been an avid supporter of Rise's Art Speaks program for many years. Its corporate office buildings in Fridley and Shoreview rotate artwork on a regular basis and host an annual art sale so their employees can purchase original Art Speaks works, with the proceeds going directly to the artists.

Cummins's employees in the United Kingdom were so impressed with the program that the Community Involvement Team in Kent now works with the Royal School for Deaf and Hartsdown School to give young artists an opportunity to display and sell their artwork.

6. Is there anything else that should be mentioned in connection with this nomination?

Stacy Gross continually develops new avenues for artists to develop their talents and showcase their work. Here are a few quick examples of some other unique opportunities people participating in Art Speaks have enjoyed:

- Heather Barber had the opportunity to collaborate with artist H. (Heather) Leigh on a fully sensory art piece. They were the proud recipients of the *Bill Murray Choice Award* in the CoLab project at The Show Gallery Lowertown in late 2017.
- More than 180 volunteers, people we serve, and Rise team members worked for 400 hours on one-of-a-kind mosaic hot air balloon project featuring five pieces total. It hangs “to lift one’s spirits” at Rise’s Spring Lake Park administrative offices.
- The Saint Paul Almanac, a nonprofit literary-centered arts organization, held their annual Winter Party Launch on December 6, and Deb Socha was thrilled to have art piece she co-created among the six “Impressions” featured. Deb worked with artist Cami Applequist to illustrate a poem written by Margaret Hasse. The art and poem pieces were posted on Twin Cities metro-area buses, light-rail trains, and bus shelters.

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Scenes from Art Speaks

