

Building an Inclusive Society

Promoting Access to the Arts for All

CALLING ALL CALENDAR ENTRIES

This is our final call for entries to be included in the Art Beyond Sight Calendar! Send us your organization's name, event date, time, location, and contact if pre-registration is required. The calendar is available on our website:

<http://www.artbeyondsight.org/change/aw-calendar.shtml>.



Art Beyond Sight *Awareness Month*

Greetings to all newcomers and long-time participants!

Last October marked the 10th year anniversary of Art Beyond Sight Awareness Month. We celebrated a decade's worth of efforts made by museums, schools, cultural institutions, libraries, and service organizations in increasing art education for the disabled. This year, we are thrilled to be celebrating art education and creativity for people with vision loss and other disabilities once again.

Email Alert 1

October 2013

NEED MORE...

BROCHURES? Simply send an email to Marie Clapot, Program Director, at marie.clapot@artbeyondsight.org, indicating the number of brochures needed as well as your mailing address.

PRESS COVERAGE? Contact Art Beyond Sight for direct quotes from its staff to include in your press release – or simply give Art Beyond Sight's phone number to local press reporters – (212) 334 -8723. You can also print our factsheets and include them in your press kits. The factsheets can be found at: <http://www.artbeyondsight.org/change/aw-pressroom.shtml>

SPOTLIGHT MICHELLE LOPEZ

Michelle Lopez is the senior program coordinator of Queens Museum of Art. Having served children and families on the autism spectrum as an ABA Instructor, counselor and trainer, she is now working with Queens Museum of Art's *ArtAccess* library programs and coordinates the Autism Initiatives program, which is a multi-year partnership with the Queens Library. Through this program, families can access bilingual studio art classes held at the various Queens Library branches.

Programs have included classes such as *Photography Class*, *Beautiful Oops*, and *The Magic Tree House* series. *The Magic Tree House*, a 6-week series, provided students of all reading levels with the chance to make art inspired by the themes in books 1-4 of the book series.

INTERVIEW WITH MICHELLE LOPEZ

ART BEYOND SIGHT: Why did you become involved with ArtAccess/Autism Initiatives?

MICHELLE LOPEZ: Art access is the part of our education department that focuses on special needs, so I was interested in working with it because of my art therapy background. In terms of Autism Initiatives, back when I was in school I gained experience from working at a preschool with children on the autism spectrum. I didn't know exactly what I wanted to do at the time but that's when I became interested in autism. When I started working at the Queens Museum of Art, we had a grant for the new New Yorkers program, which is a program for adults and the immigrant community. So at the time, most of the programs were for adults but the coordinator wanted to make programs for families as well, including programs for early childhood. It just so happened that one of the families of the program had a child on the autism spectrum – this family invited other friends and family of the autism community and the number of classmates increased thereafter. The coordinator of this new program wasn't familiar with working with those on the autism spectrum. That's when I came to help out – it ended up becoming a popular and successful class. And at the same time, the Queens Library was looking to gain training for working with families and children with special needs – that's when I decided to focus more on autism and became involved with Autism Initiatives.

ABS: What is the goal of Autism Initiatives?

ML: The goal overall is to create more inviting institutions for families on the autism spectrum. Thankfully, looking at how things are now, it looks like a lot of the museums have gone on that journey, starting their own autism initiatives. I think now, we're really thinking about the relationship of community spaces for individuals on the autism spectrum so that they can develop relationships with these institutions. Another goal is to offer practical tools to help families understand *how* to use a museum. These families can then pass these tools onto others. Last but not least, another goal would be teaching these families to use this cultural network to their advantage. The focus of Autism Initiatives has shifted from children to families in recent years. Due to this, our main focus is socialization because sometimes educators can feel intimidated and vice versa. So a primary goal is socialization.

ABS: What are some programs that have been created through Autism Initiatives?

ML: We first started with photography classes, then DJ classes, to traditional art making classes and art-making classes inspired by books. We've also done composing, lighting classes – whatever is of interest of the educators. Programs are often educator driven so it usually comes down to the educator. If the educator is passionate about a specific topic, the participants are more willing to learn about it because it is presented to them in an exciting way. Because every child is interested in having a positive experience, we will really initiate any program that an educator is willing to teach as long as they are open to opening up their curriculum in this manner.

ABS: What kind of skills do you focus on enriching in the classroom? Through programs such like the Magic Tree House series?

ML: A series like the Magic Tree House series happens over 6 weeks, so we start with socialization skills. Children learn to greet each other and to reinforce the action of acknowledging their peers. For the Magic Tree House series in particular, we were also trying to wean children off of picture books. Since many children are visual learners, they tend to need that .

The great thing about the Magic Tree House series is that there is a set beginning, middle, and end to the story line, and they always focus on science or social study based needs – subjects part of a school’s core curriculum. One thing I’d like to emphasize is that it’s not that children *can’t* learn, it’s that you want to get them to learn. The idea is to introduce them to themes that will come up in the book and get them interested in those themes. If the theme is mummies, we will introduce them to the idea of Egypt so when they read the books in class or with their parents, they begin to see certain words come to life because of the previous reenactments in class. This applies to children whether they can read or not.

We want children to be eventually able to do this on their own. We show parents that the vocabulary of a visual thinker can be built by adding images to words – and images can be added to words by playing around with material found at home. The ultimate goal is to help them be independent in their reading and get them interested in topics.

ABS: Who do you think adults benefit from participating in programs like the Open Studio program? (The Open Studio is a program for adults only)

ML: First and foremost, the adults come on Sunday and they register for every class individually. We don’t want a large group to book during that time because we want adults to live independently. For instance, there might not be enough space for an adult to register due to group booking. We want adults to feel like attending this class is entirely up to them – they book the class and they attend. We also charge a dollar in order to help them understand money management.

Usually, 2-4 participants come to each class. The adults choose what they want to do because, they’re adults. If they want to make cards, have a conversation, whatever it is they want to do, it is up to them. We have participants that come every week and work on one art piece for a long period of time with their own materials. The idea here is not to teach them to make artwork but allow them to ask for what materials they want in making it. If they want to make the sky look more profound, Mitra, the art therapist, can make suggestions. The direction these adults want to take is ultimately up to them. We want to provide them with a studio space where they can make decisions.

Adults can also benefit from Open Studio because it provides a social community. The adults look forward to seeing each other, sharing new sketches, and interacting with one another.

ABS: Can you describe the process of collaborating with teaching artists and/or art therapists in developing new programs/How do you go about developing a program together to successfully help those with autism?

ML: We collaborate and develop a program by teaching art therapists how to incorporate more entry points into their lessons. For instance, just talking to the kids won’t suffice because children of the autism spectrum are usually visual learners. At the same time, some of them are not entirely visual – some need to take action and *do*. So throughout the process of developing a program, we make it clear that the communication to the kids needs to be clear, which includes giving participants space and/or more time. We enjoy adapting to the different personalities and teaching styles of art therapists and teaching artists, but we also make sure to let them know to pace each lesson.



ART BEYOND SIGHT

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Four years ago, I started working with a photographer named Sol Aramendi. I still work with her and she currently runs education programs for adult learners who deal with identity issues due to immigration. At the time, she was interested in working with those with autism so she taught a student participant the technical aspects of using a camera. For the first camera class session, we had participants take a look at the camera and play around with it. Some participants are really skilled with the digital camera and might be less open to suggestions so teaching one lesson in several different ways within one class session is important. Some participants may get stuck on one detail and others might only be observing the camera as a whole.

Adding contrast within one class session is important. For instance, Sol may have participants take 5 pictures from up close and 5 from far away. This is an ideal method as opposed to teaching a specific way for one week and introducing another method the next week because doing so would make some participants feel like they're being corrected, when the teacher is really just trying to introduce a range of skills.

ABS: What's the most rewarding part about working children of the autism community?

ML: I'm seeing that institutions are taking on autism initiatives of their own and I'm pleased to see how far this community has grown, as well as how many more opportunities there are now. When I used to work in a home with a family who had an autistic child, I remember seeing how difficult it was for the parent and how they had no courage to go out into society. Seeing how kids enjoy learning about all kinds of subjects, as opposed to when I first started in the field, it seemed that child was "supposed to have" a single interest. Now, there are a range of topics that can be introduced to a child. Again, in terms of using a camera, a child can learn not just how to use it but how to make beautiful images.

All in all, being able to see how far educators have come, how much the community has grown, and how educators are taking more chances is very rewarding. Lastly, seeing changes in special education reform, seeing major changes in schools, and seeing institutions realize that these children can't be taught social skills in an isolated space.

ABS: What is the most challenging part of working with the autism community?

ML: The most challenging aspect of working with children from this community is that there's still a long way to go. Providing sensory experiences is important for every learner but it really shouldn't stop there. We need to set the expectations higher and trust in the process.

It's also a bit frustrating that some educators and teachers are meeting these children for the first time in a standard classroom setting and thinking "How do I teach a group of 30 kids 5 of them having special needs? How do I engage these 5 children?" or, "What's the point of having these 5 kids in the larger group setting?" These kinds of responses can be frustrating.

Last but not least, art business is not about special needs or marginalized groups, so funding for museum space is challenging. Finding a funder or funding source committed for the long term is tricky. We would love to pay for a great educator but often can't due to the lack of funding.

ABS: In what ways do you think museums can further accommodate those affected by autism?

ML: I think we have to stop thinking about the autism community as a particular population. We should really be thinking about the *whole*. Truth is, museums are not accessible to all people and programming *is* important, but you don't need to know whether a visitor has a specific disorder. Rather, there should be more ways to enrich a visitor's experience – for example, providing images or some tactile objects for children who are non-verbal by making sure that they can participate and walk around the same way as other visitors.

There are many great programs for those with autism within a museum, but if a staff member or another museumgoer shushes an autistic child, the child's experience is ruined. You would never invite someone to your house, put out food on the table, and suddenly yell at them, "Don't eat the food!" The museum is everyone's house and it's up to each individual to be courteous. If someone with autism walks through a museum door, the museum must accept them as the way they are. It's not anyone's job to change them.



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Images from Colorado by Ann Cunningham:



We are standing on the plains to the east of the Colorado Rockies looking west. On our left is Colorado's boarder with New Mexico and on the right is our boarder with Wyoming. The distance from New Mexico to Wyoming is 280 miles. This sculpture is 140 inches wide so 1/2 inch represents 1 mile.

Vertically the scale is 1 1/2 inches equals 1000 feet. The bottom of the picture is sea level. Denver is placed at one mile high and the snow capped mountains top out right around 14,000 feet in elevation. The city icons are somewhat indicative of population, Denver is the largest, Trinidad is the smallest and the others range in-between those two extremes.

Around the edge of the image are six state symbols including the state flower, flag, bird, insect, fish, and mammal. These bas relief are carved in slate.

The large image is carved from:

sky - blue limestone lightly textured

mountain caps - sparkling white marble glassy smooth

mountains - red travertine heavily textured

plains - smooth green onyx, the rivers are rounded indents running as they would across the plains and I-70 is a squared indent.

Ann Cunningham specializes in creating tactile pictures. These have been featured in her exhibits, her children's books and as tactile interpretations of museum's collections. For more information, visit her website: <http://www.acunningham.com>

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