Ability Through the Arts: Disabled adults find creative expression in local programs

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SALT LAKE CITY — Although Sarah Farmer's daughter Lillia is normally very shy, when she performs onstage with Elevate Theater Company, a local arts group for disabled adults, she "lights up."

"Last year, she was the lead, and she did a big solo tap dance and song, and people who just know her personally never would've guessed she could've gotten up to do such a thing," Sarah Farmer said. "It's just a wonderful chance for her to express her talents and her creativity in a way that wouldn't be allowed anywhere else in the community."

Lillia is one of many Utah disabled adults who need a safe environment for self-expression and the chance to interact with peers in a setting that also reinforces important life skills. A handful of local arts programs are working hard to provide benefits for adults with disabilities that are difficult to find anywhere else.

The void of opportunity for disabled adults

Joan Provost, whose son David is also a member of the Elevate Theater Company, said there are very few opportunities available to adults with disabilities after they graduate from the public school system.

"They are such an underrecognized resource," Provost said. "There is literally nothing unless parents create it."

Lisa Eckersley, whose daughter Annie is enrolled in Tanner Dance's programming for adults with disabilities, said it can be hard for parents of disabled adults to find educational opportunities and worthwhile ways for their children to spend their time.

Christopher Lee

Instructor Mary-Martha Ostler, left, and Andy Melville of Tanner Dance's LEADD Program perform in an October 2017 showcase.

Depending on one's level of ability, a disabled adult may enter the workforce, attend college, move into a group home or enroll in a transitional/life skills or day program after they finish public school. But these programs and workshops can require a great deal of funding, according to Lisa Thornton, Tanner Dance advisory board member and parent of a disabled child.

As a result of these limited opportunities, many disabled adults are left with menial job experiences or sitting at home, Provost said. But staying home alone is not good for disabled adults, according to Thornton.

"We see a lot of the older adults as they get into their early 20s, they become very discouraged and very depressed, and they kind of change personalities," Thornton said.

How community arts programs are working to fill the void
TURN City Center for the Arts began about five years ago when its founders recognized there was a lack of creative outlets in the community for adults with disabilities, according to program coordinator Katie Johnson.

“They saw a need for something more than what had been provided for this population: expression,” Johnson said. “What this place does is it provides a voice for a population of people who traditionally have been told that their voice doesn’t matter.”

When individuals with disabilities are young, it is easier for parents and caregivers to find programs that foster their creative and artistic sides. But as they move beyond adolescence into adulthood, those programs largely disappear.

Tanner Dance came face to face with these needs when teachers and administrators began receiving requests from parents to create arts programming for disabled adults, many of whom had aged out of Tanner Dance’s classes for disabled children and young adults.

“When those programs stop, for a lot of these families, ... then their kids, if they’re not able to do a job in one way or another, many of them are kind of stuck at home watching video games,” Tanner Dance Director MaryAnn Lee said. “This is an opportunity for them to come and do meaningful, exciting things.”

According to executive director Shandra Benito, Art Access, which was founded in 1984, started for very similar reasons. After hearing from a group of increasingly frustrated parents of disabled children, Art Access began as an art festival for children with disabilities and has since grown to accommodate adults with disabilities.

“It is a privilege to be able to support our community to have the access to the arts that they deserve and to advocate for increased accessibility that benefits everyone,” Benito said.

**Shifting the focus from disability to ability**

Jon Westling, a student at TURN City Center for the Arts, said he enjoys his art classes because he likes being creative.

“It allows me to use the one muscle in my body that actually works really well: my brain,” Westling said. “I consider our little art program more like a family rather than just a stupid day program where people just sit around and pick their nose and watch the paint dry on the wall.”

Sarah Farmer said she loves that the program gives disabled adults a chance to do the same things other adults get to do in a community.

“Those who love music and the arts and theater have a chance to express themselves and gain confidence and become a team and really make friendships with other people in their community,” Sarah Farmer said. “It’s a wonderful opportunity for them.”

Art has a tremendous impact on the lives of all people, disabled or not, and group classes give all people the opportunity to meet other like-minded individuals and share the artistic experience. For Rebecca Barley, the adaptive manager for Salt Lake County Parks and Recreation, it is that combination of art and sociality that makes these programs so essential.

“The most important things to me for my students are did they learn something new, and did they make a friend?” Barley said. “Our art students learn about colors, tones, patterns, brush movements, while making lasting friendships.”
Provided by Rebecca Barley

From left: Salt Lake County Adaptive Art students David Johnson, Annie Beach, Kendon Riep, Mariah Pomikala, Travis Coverston and Lamar Bryner show the art they created in a class about color tones and patterns.

And while art programs can help anyone who takes them, their impact can be even more profound for those with disabilities, said Benito.

“This might be because they haven't been given access to art before and because of the stress, hardship and barriers that come with living as an adult with a disability in a world that was not necessarily built for you and does not always accommodate your needs,” Benito said.

Provost said participating in local arts programs like Elevate Theater Company provides an important stress-relieving, language-building and socializing opportunity for disabled adults every week.

“There’s a certain amount of fantasy in all of this that removes you from the day to day,” Provost said. “The interaction, the one-on-one talking to your cast mate, shows you what a normal conversation looks like, and you pick up cues from doing that, so that is extremely helpful.”

Mother Pat Kristensen has observed that Tanner Dance’s programming for disabled adults has filled a void of opportunities for her son Conor and others to grow.

“There is not a lot of opportunities in the valley that have programs like this,” Pat Kristensen said. “Even if they go into employment, sometimes employment doesn’t have the skills to teach them to grow, so (with) this, they grow in physical ways, they grow in their cognitive ways; ... I think this really builds their confidence a lot.”

Tanner Dance

From left: Conor Kristensen, Madeline Rencher and Samuel Rencher of Tanner Dance's Elevate Theater Company take a photo in costume for their May 2017 performance of “Press Start.”

Conor Kristensen agrees.

“For me and the others that are in the class, for different levels of ability, (it) shows their way of showing their strengths,” he said. “That’s what part of acting is.”

Pat Kristensen said although participating in these arts programs is a challenge for the disabled adults who participate, it is also a wonderful opportunity for them to grow.

“They work really hard, but they have fun doing it, and the way it’s designed, they bring out all their strengths,” Pat Kristensen said. “That’s how you grow is through challenge.”