Creating art at Matt’s Place gives kids sense of belonging

by Becky Ginos
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CENTERVILLE — Art can sometimes bridge the differences in society. For the children at Matt’s Place, working together to create a mosaic wall gave them a sense of belonging.

“The kids made the pieces and put them together piece by piece,” said recreation therapist Jackque Sheppard at the unveiling last Friday. “They were so excited about it. They love art.”

Matt’s Place opened in March 2015 and offers programs for children from 5 to 18 years old who have autism, learning disabilities, anxiety or any other mental health issue, said Sheppard.

“We got a grant from Art Access,” she said. “They try to make art accessible to kids and adults with disabilities. Artist Roger Whiting worked with us and his specialty is mosaic. He wanted to do something that could be displayed so people would know what we’re all about. He came once a week for about three months and worked with the kids.”

Sheppard said the kids looked forward to him coming each week. “They’d ask, ‘is Roger coming? Is Roger coming?’ all spring,” she said. “It’s a great way to do it (art) with a professional. That’s what was so special about Roger is he got everyone involved. There’s a big range of abilities, but every single kid was involved from all ages.”

Matt’s Place was started by Sherlene and Jim Dean. Jim’s son Matt has high functioning autism and they thought this would be a good way to give back, said Sheppard. “There is a lot of need in Davis County,” she said. “We have a few different programs. They do a little bit of school but mostly we work on social skills so that they can get back into their homes and be more successful.”

Quarterly Matt’s Place hosts a parent education group and Matt Dean (the facility’s namesake) speaks from the perspective of someone living with autism.
“It’s nice to have a place named after me,” said Matt. “I come out and do a Q&A with parents and give a realistic idea of what we think about and how we interpret things. Our disability is not physical it’s more social interactions. Often our peers and colleagues don’t quite understand the symptoms of autism so we get judged easily as odd or peculiar.”

Matt said people have been surprised to find out he served an LDS mission and graduated from college. “I was given task oriented assignments like digitizing patriarchal blessings, but when I went on splits with the missionaries I didn’t know what to say. Society has a hard time understanding.”

Things like group sports and dating have been challenging too, Matt said. “I’m 28 and I want to date and get married,” he said. “But it’s hard. In my brain I go through a checklist like I paid the check, I opened the door or I held her hand. To me that means it was a successful date. But if the girl has no connection, then other factors come in.”

Team sports were difficult for him as well. “I wasn’t agile,” he said. “But I was very successful at golf and chess. Some kids are good at video games or bowling – things that you can work at your own level without the pressure from your peers. I found individual sports work great.”

Matt lives on his own and works for insurance underwriters as an account manager. “It took about two years but now I know the process and there aren’t a lot of curve balls. The program never changes,” he said. “Change can be hard for someone with autism. We know we lack social skills and we want to do the best we can to fit in.”

Although he has his struggles, Matt said he’s very grateful. “The thing I love about being autistic is I don’t feel like I have a mean bone in my body,” he said. “We can be difficult to manage and set in our ways but we’re genuinely good people.”

Artist Roger Whiting found that to be true. “The kids are so wonderful,” he said. “They’ve all got such different talents. Art has room for your voice no matter what your abilities are.”