New Art Access director looks to expand reach, making art accessible to all

By Megan Hulse
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Provided by Jackelin Slack, Art Access

Shandra Benito, the new director of the Art Access Gallery, wants to bring in as many new faces as possible.

Shandra Benito, who is deaf, had hard time as a child because of her disability. She attributes her confidence in life to learning to play the trumpet in middle school.

“Growing up, I had a very similar experience to most people with disabilities. I was picked on, I didn’t have a lot of friends and I always felt different,” Benito said in an interview with the Deseret News. “But when I started playing the trumpet, it gave me so much confidence to be a part of something bigger than me.”
As the new executive director for the Art Access Gallery, Benito is eager to be a part of what she describes as yet another “life-giving” experience to look at the bigger picture and to improve the lives of those with disabilities in the Salt Lake area.

Located just off of 200 South in downtown Salt Lake City, Art Access is a gallery that focuses on giving all communities access to the arts and seeks to “play a significant role in helping to eliminate social barriers and create an inclusive world for everyone through art,” according to its mission statement at accessart.org.

One of the main goals of Art Access is maintaining accessibility for those with disabilities, which is a large part of what drew Benito to the position, she said.

“Being deaf was the best thing that ever happened to me,” Benito said. “It helps me to have empathy with and understand the need to fight for other communities. I know how it feels to be excluded and not have people want to work to provide you access. It makes me want to stand up when I see that happening.”

Benito has been standing up for others throughout her career. She worked as a fundraising director at a number of nonprofits for domestic abuse against women and has helped individuals "with disabilities, people experiencing homelessness, survivors of domestic violence and sexual assault, immigrants, refugees, and native and indigenous people," according to her biography on the Art Access website.

However, Benito said that she felt a special calling in accepting the position at Art Access, which she took on in January.

“I believe that how we run organizations has a strong impact on how we impact social justice,” Benito said of her mission for Art Access. “If an organization is not run with same framework as the promotion of social justice values, then we aren’t doing the right thing.”

Ultimately, Benito said that she wants to make sure that the 32-year-old organization is around for at least 32 more, continuing the work that the staff has already begun.

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Currently, the gallery is hosting creative writing workshops for senior citizens and printmaking classes for veterans.

Alongside the current programming, Benito feels that her purpose at Art Access is to make its programming even more widely accessible and hopes to reach as many communities as possible. Her plans include team workshops, with the goal of integrating different communities through collaboration in printmaking.

“Bringing more people in is always our goal,” she said.

Art Access Gallery is a part of the Gallery Stroll series that takes the third Friday of every month. The new exhibits scheduled to open March 17 include ethnic ceramics by Ed Napia, beaded works by Rad Chuch, wearable art by Wahid Migoli and "Off the Map," a group multimedia exhibit "featuring artwork based on various locations and landmarks in downtown Salt Lake City," according to the gallery's website.

Art fans can also participate in the annual fundraiser, called 300 Plates, at the end of May. This event provides a large amount of the yearly funding for Art Access, while also giving local artists a chance to showcase their work to a
large-scale audience.

Information about upcoming exhibits, workshops and events is at accessart.org.

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