

World Autism Awareness Day (WAAD) “Don’t ‘dis’ the ability”.... Artworks by Individuals on the Autism Spectrum – Artists give back!

*Written By: Dr. Rosa C. Martinez
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The concept of WAAD- “Don’t ‘dis’ the ability” : Artworks by individuals on the Autism Spectrum is to expand our understanding of the diversity of people on the autism spectrum while educating the world about the abilities and opportunities to encourage advancement in every human beyond their individual challenges. The participating artists shared their contributions with the world as an extension of this message to “train the talent” and to foster independence.

“Don’t ‘dis’ the ability” 2008 featured artworks of artists with autism from around the globe including Temple Grandin, Ping Lian Yeak, Stephen Wiltshire, Gregory Blackstock, George Widener, Christophe Pillault, Jonathan Lerman, Jessica Park, Richard Wawro, Donna Williams, Amanda LaMunyon, Seth Chwast, Susan Brown and works by children from the state of Qatar. Each artist contributed a percentage of the sales proceeds toward autism research!

The opening reception of this extraordinary exhibition at the United Nations was a phenomenal event. Twelve year old participating artist Amanda LaMunyon flew in from Oklahoma with her mother Sherry and her brother J-Paul for the Autism Speaks and Qatar sponsored WAAD events. Amanda began painting when she was 7 years old and was diagnosed with Asperger’s Syndrome at the age of 8. She began reading at the age of 4. In kindergarten she drew all her ABCs instead of cutting out pictures for them. This was the first sign of Amanda’s artistic ability. At the opening reception Amanda astonished the audience with an eloquent recital of a poem she wrote entitled “A Little Secret”



http://www.amazing-kids.org/ezone_22/littlesecret.html

In the poem she described how “a little tag on her clothes might feel like sand paper, how food needs to taste just right or it won’t be eaten, how being around a lot of people sometimes makes her want to run”. She described the existence of Asperger’s in a way that no book description could ever convey. Amanda shares her story and talents with all who will listen and hopes to give us a different perspective of people with differences.

Also attending the United Nations opening reception live was savant artist George Widener. George who is often described as “eccentric, socially aloof, and obsessed with arcane subjects humored the audience with several “witty” statements such as “I don’t do poetry” when his introduction followed Amanda’s recital. Imagine possessing such a massive memory that you could recall thousands of historical trivia, facts, or world census figures. George is called a “lightning calendar calculator”. In 2004 he defeated a former NASA scientist who was using a laptop computer in answering the question “What day of the week will June 25th be in the year 47,253?”. George graduated from the University of Tennessee at Knoxville at age 37 earning a general Liberal Arts degree, Cum Laude. At the reception George introduced himself as having the “best calendar memory in the world” and asked for a birthdate from anyone in the audience. Suzanne Wright (co-founder of Autism Speaks) initially



volunteered her birthday, but George needed a year of birth. Needless to say, he went on to choose a male volunteer. Upon hearing the man's birthday, George responded within seconds "Your birthday is on a Thursday, you will be 18,993 days old". George uses his amazing memory to create unique contemporary artwork.

The United Nations Exhibition was hosted at the Secretariat building which is the administrative home base to the UN delegates. Due to limited space capacity the exhibition was not open to the general public and the reception was by special invitation only. In order to be able to reach the general public the exhibition continued at The Manhattan Children's Center (MCC)

<http://www.manhattanchildrenscenter.org/about.html>

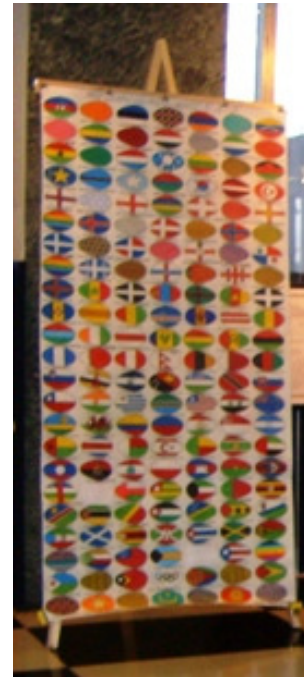
MCC was honored to have participating artist Gregory Blackstock live at the exhibition. When the exhibition first opened and guests were slowly arriving Greg exclaimed "I am on a business trip. Where are all the people?" Greg is the author of Blackstock Collections and he was available for book signings while also striking up conversations with guests in English and other languages. In between conversations with guests Greg sat and drew various works (one of which he sold on the NYC subway to an admirer who noticed his work!) Gregory's drawings are often large, on several sheets of paper pieced together by Greg with tape and glue. Using pencil, crayon, ink and marker, Gregory depicts insects, baskets, aircraft, etc. with incredible



precision of detail, straight lines and text. Greg's work "Eggs" caused quite a stir while on exhibition at The United Nations. The curator was called several times to cover up certain "eggs" that were not "allowed" to be displayed at the UN for various reasons (such as the specific nation colors represented in the drawing NOT being part of the

UN). If you look closely at the photos from the events you will note some "white spots or missing eggs" in the UN photos, but MCC guests were able to view this work of art as intended by the artist "no white spots"/ "no missing eggs"!

On behalf of all of the attendees and the organizations involved, I would like to extend a warm and sincere "Thank you!" to all of the artists for enriching our lives with their contributions and for their support in funding autism research.



To view photos of the opening events "WAAD – "Don't 'dis' the ability 2008" go to <http://www.RCMAutismNotebook.com>

Dr. Martinez is an Autism Spectrum Disorder educational consultant at The Children's Center for Early Learning, and Co-leader of the Brooklyn Autism Speaks Walk Committee. She was the co-curator along with Dr. Laurence Becker of the "Don't 'dis' the ability" savant exhibition tour in New York 2006. To contact Dr. Martinez: e-mail at RCMPHD1@verizon.net