

art matters art matters

Art turns disabilities into abilities

By **Elaine Bean**

How do you teach someone who cannot see to make visual art? Is it even possible?

It is when you have a student who loves art and a teacher who is creative

in a special class at the Ocean City Center for the Arts.

“I taped off her different horizon lines on her paper to indicate when to change colors,” Buford said. “Rachael painted with one hand, and, with the other, she could feel the lines. All I did was help her load her brush with paint. When we finished, she was so excited to show her mother what



Barbara Buford and Patrick Cook

she had painted. She put her hand over top of mine and said, ‘I love painting with you.’”

“I never met anyone who gets so much joy out of painting, and she can’t see what she did,” Buford continued. “She just has a love for creat-

ing. She creates with her heart and not her sight. Rachael is very eager to learn new techniques and does not allow her disability to hold her back. We worked together to turn her

enough to solve the problem. Barbara Buford teaches Rachael Cardwell, who is blind and a client of the Worcester County Developmental Center, how to paint by giving her hands-on attention

disability into an ability.”

Every month, a group of adults from the Worcester County Developmental Center (WCDC) travels from Newark, MD. to the Arts Center for a class with Buford. WCDC is committed to empowering adults with disabilities to be inclusive members of society capable of independent thinking and advocating for themselves to create rich meaningful lives.

That mission merges well with the vision of the Art League of Ocean City, which is to be a cultural center and regional catalyst while inspiring creativity and providing accessibility to and promoting an understanding of the value of the arts.

Allison Barton, WCDC Director of Arts and Culture, believes everyone possesses unique talents. “The WCDC Art Program provides adults with disabilities in our community a creative outlet to express themselves and communicate at times when they may not have the words. Our program also works to give clients a means to show off their creative accomplishments to promote social interactions, build confidence, and help maintain strong cognition, memory, and psychological resilience.”

“The members and instructors of the Art League have provided an environment that allows our artists to freely express themselves through various forms of art,” she continued. “Working with the Art League has increased our clients’ connections and comfort in the community. The Art League provides a forum for our clients to learn from others and to show the community, regardless of disability status, everyone possesses unique talents and abilities and can play an active role in society.”

On a Tuesday at the Arts Center, the WCDC clients sit around a table with paper and paint in front of them, and Buford guides them step-by-step on what to do next. They work intently, asking for help when they need it. Their faces are full of smiles when

they proudly hold up a finished piece of artwork they created.

The main goal of the class is to have fun. A mantra Buford shares with her students is, “Don’t let anyone steal your joy.” And passing on the joy of art is always Buford’s goal.

“I worked with a young woman who had a cognitive disability,” Buford related. “She told me her one dream in life was to see her artwork hanging in a gallery. I decided at that moment I would make it my mission to help her dreams come true. On opening night of the show, she sold her first painting. I realized at that moment art brought her such overwhelming joy. She didn’t have the words to tell her story but art filled that void. I believe art heals and gives a voice to those who may not be able to express



Barbara helps Rachel

themselves. It is my passion to help people with disabilities become an intricate part of our art community.”

“A student of hers once proclaimed that Barbara was a living angel right here in front of us, and I believe her,” Kacie Neeb, Gallery Assistant and Camp Director for the Art League, said.

Because of her dedication, Buford was given the Art League of Ocean City’s SHERo Award in 2021 for her teaching gifts to the community. And she’s still at it. Buford regularly teaches art classes for the Art League, including Free Family Art Days and heART & Soul, a class geared for those healing from stress or trauma.

