

Unlocking the Mind

ORLANDO MUSEUM OF ART REACHES OUT TO THE SPECIAL NEEDS COMMUNITY.

BY KEVIN FRITZ

Total community access. That is the goal of Jan Clayton, associate curator of adult programs for the Orlando Museum of Art (OMA), who debuted the Creative Connections program for developmentally disabled students in March. Clayton, who has been with OMA for more than 25 years, says the new initiative is part of her plan to develop community-access programs for a whole new visitor. "Art is not just for the elite," she says. "Art speaks to all people of all ages, and all economic levels."

Based on the success of Art's the Spark @ OMA, which brings Alzheimer's patients and others suffering memory loss to the museum, Clayton launched Creative Connections to invite special needs children in grades 3 to 8 and their families to experience the world of art. The tours are limited to 20 people and take place the first Sunday of the month. Volunteer guides address both realistic and abstract artworks, which showcase animals, people, and landscapes and are chosen specifically for the audience. The guides use the same syntax they employ with other school children who visit the museum; the idea is to help make a connection between the students and the art.

"It is not therapy," Clayton says, "but it can be therapeutic. Who knows what art could unlock?"

Clayton says she borrowed the idea for community-access programs from her colleagues in New York at the Museum of Modern Art. A local advisory board—consisting of representatives from the Center for Autism and Related Diseases (CARD) at the University of Central Florida, the Rollins College Department for Disabled Students, Morning Star School and Easter



ORLANDO MUSEUM OF ART recently launched a new program designed to enable developmentally disabled children and their families to enjoy the museum.

ORLANDO MUSEUM OF ART

Seals—helped design Creative Connections and will also assist in conducting the tours.

The tours are private and are held in an area that is closed to the public, allowing families a chance to explore the museum without any hesitation. "It's an exclusive tour for the parents, siblings and students. This is what parents are looking for," she says. "It's an idyllic situation to get out on a Sunday, see some art, interact and grab some lunch."

CARD President Christa Lublin, whose 8-year-old son Alex was diagnosed with autism when he was 4, says Creative Connections is an idea that is a long time in coming for the Orlando area. "This program gives us the time to relax and enjoy as a family without worries," she says, noting that participants are surrounded by others who experience the same day-to-day challenges. The museum's new initiative is perfect for Alex, adds Lublin.

"Usually this kind of environment is not accessible for him to enjoy, but this program funnels down to what he needs. It's an amazing concept—and it works. He appreciated the art and talked about it."

The tours begin with sketching, which Clayton says has a calming effect and helps students gain focus. After exploring the artwork, which includes questions and the encouragement of dialogue, the tour ends by having participants make their own landscapes. "It helps build self-esteem," Clayton says of the studio time at the end. "They leave with something that they can say they created at the art museum."

The next Creative Connections take place May 6 and June 3 at 11:30 a.m. For more information or to register, call 407.896.4231 or visit omart.org. **oam**

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