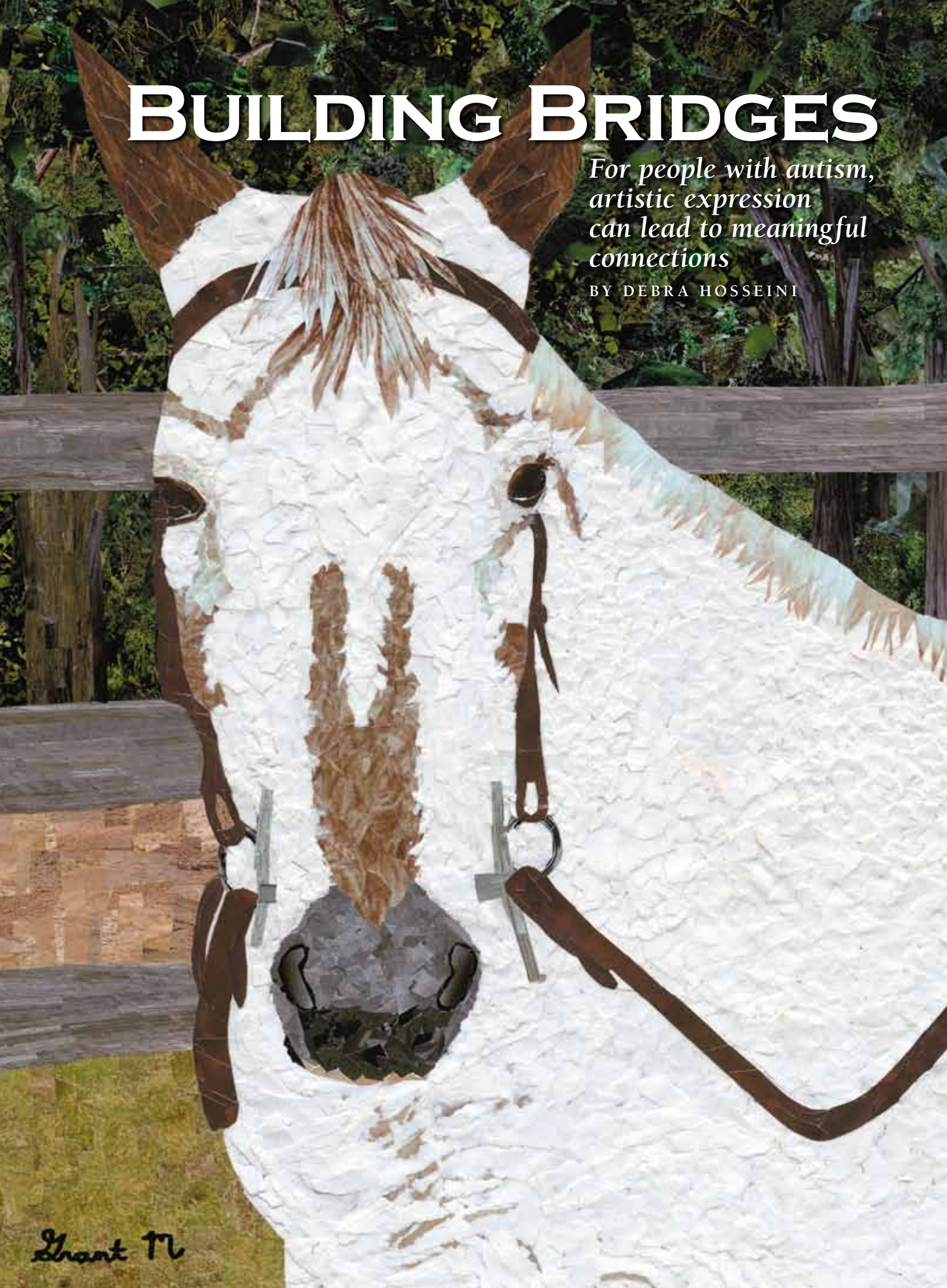


BUILDING BRIDGES

*For people with autism,
artistic expression
can lead to meaningful
connections*

BY DEBRA HOSSEINI

Grant M



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Will Kerner, Teeny Toddler



Grace Goad, Multimedia Collage

ARTISTIC EXPRESSION

Define “artistic expression” as the ability to communicate one’s innate individuality. It may manifest through creation of works of art, music, or scientific endeavor. Every single one of us holds within ourselves an accessible spark of our unique brand of creative self-expression. People with autism are no exception. In fact, they may be able to access their true essence more readily than “neurotypical” people.

People with autism often function in a reality free from societal expectations, free of the limited notions of how *the world is supposed to be*, and how *WE are supposed to be*. It is this lack of societal bias that allows many on the spectrum to reside outside the artificial boxes society creates. This results in unique points of reference and highly novel renderings of subject material.

Some may see art in shredded paper, in the colors and shapes of numbers, or the poetry of a simple purple tree. Elaine Hall, founder of the Miracle Project,

writes how her son Neal showed her that when the sun hit an ordinary hubcap there was “...a kaleidoscope of brilliant, shining shards of light.” Elaine goes on to say that if she had not knelt down to see what Neal was looking at, she would have missed this insight into his perceptions and the reason for his fascination with hubcaps. “After that day,” she writes, “Neal never needed to stop and look at hubcaps again.”

People on the spectrum may have highly sophisticated spatial, tactile, musical or mathematical intelligence.

These intelligences can serve as a focal point from which creativity emerges. Hypersensitivities to sound, light, patterns, color, shapes, movement, numbers, vibrations, and smells can be channeled in ways to enhance creativity.

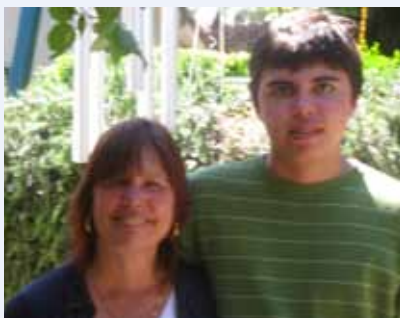
During the creation of his art, my son Kevin focuses on textures, colors, and maneuvering the brush across the canvas. All the while, habituations associated with autism



Kevin Hosseini, Bus and Cycle

CONNECTIONS WITHIN AND WITHOUT

Over the years, Kevin has come to enjoy sharing his art with others. This is another way Kevin connects to the outside world. More importantly, art allows Kevin to connect within himself. It serves as a powerful tool to process his inner climate of perplexing thoughts and emotions, giving shape and color to his world.



By keeping an open dialogue about the properties of the natural world, his family and I incorporate Kevin's creations into his daily routines. For example, when walking by the ocean, I will ask, "What colors do you see, Kevin?" When passing by a particularly beautiful flower, I will ask, "How would you paint this flower, Kevin?" His answers often astound or mystify me. They always broaden my sense of what "is" for Kevin.

His art inspires, instructs, and informs my own life. It's as therapeutic for me as it is for him.

INNOVATIVE APPROACHES

Many artists on the spectrum find novel and innovative ways to use different mediums and tools. A good art facilitator encourages this.

Artist Wil Kerner, the "Cut-Out Kid," uses scissors, glue and paste in his creations. Wil doesn't position his fingers and thumb in the holes of his scissors. Instead, he wraps his hand entirely around the scissors, somehow mysteriously making them cut.

My son Kevin often uses the wooden end of the brush to scratch designs into his paintings.

Artist Grace Goad places leaves into her work.

Once she plucked a Ginkgo leaf and weeks later painted it and placed it on a semi-representational piece. Because Grace lacks motor strength in her palms, she uses materials in unique ways rendering beautiful abstract pieces.



Often compensation for what may be lacking ends up enhancing the art. Other times the art can enhance a deficit. For example, Kevin's handwriting has improved because of the fine motor skills he uses to maneuver the brush on the canvas.

fall away as he focuses on what he is creating. Art serves as a refuge where Kevin is allowed to simply "be." Many aspiring artists work on developing the very techniques which Kevin and many others on the spectrum innately express.

Dr. Darold Treffert in his essay, "Myths, Autism and the Artist," believes art skills among some individuals with autism are, "...not merely compensatory, nor are they the product of continual reinforcement. Rather, they are integral to the 'disorder,' consistent with the spectrum's unusual sensitivity to various sensory stimuli, superior visual memory, precocious performance impulses, and innate access to what has been called a 'picture lexicon' or the 'rules of art.'"

BEST PRACTICES REDEFINED

"Best practices" in autism include behavioral therapies geared toward remediating perceived deficits and encouraging social appropriateness. I would like to see "best practices" expanded to include nurturing creativity and enhancing all children's imaginations so they can develop their full creative potential. This is where we all can find joy, accomplishment and a true sense of self.

Art can enhance traditional therapies or can stand on its own. In and of itself art is therapeutic. Unlike traditional autism therapies, art allows individuals to create on their own terms without a specific goal or objective. Kevin determines his own process and end points.

GROWING THROUGH ART

While some children spontaneously draw and create, others need direction and encouragement. Even painting by numbers with creative endeavor can become an art form. Kevin likes to say, "I make photographs look better."

Dr. Treffert thinks that artists on the spectrum may start with replication but as skills progress, "...interpretation, free form style, or some other form of creativity expressed in fresh, original work," develop. We've noticed that as Kevin's art becomes more abstract so does his thinking. I've talked to art therapists who believe there is a cross-over in development of abstract art and non-literal thinking.

Artist Seth Chwast began painting when he was twenty years old. In her book, *An Unexpected Life*, his mom describes how as Seth's art becomes more sophisticated, so too does his ability to communicate. I've observed artists like Seth make huge developmental leaps into their twenties, thirties, and beyond.

Artist Ricky Nesbitt is deaf and lives in a world without sound or words. At age thirty-two, Ricky began creating his unique form of art which started out contained within small circles the size of teacups. As he progressed, he broke free of the circles and began to create works that stretched from eight to a whopping two hundred twenty feet in length. Now he photographs his collections of toys, with a backdrop of color fields that he creates. His sister, Kristen, says that Ricky's artwork, "...allows us to enter a small part of his world." It has

become a bridge of communication between sister and brother.

TRANSFORMATIONS

With a little bit of creativity, repetitive behaviors can be channeled in constructive ways.

From a young age Grant Manier had a compulsion to tear paper. Instead of targeting this habit for behavior modification, Julie, Grant's mom, saw that his habit fulfilled a sensory need that was otherwise lacking. As the years passed, Grant's obsession has been directed into complex collages and intricate creations of art, often containing thousands of pieces of paper, magazine, and cardboard. Grant is now known as the "eco-artist" and, at age 16, travels to conferences, museums, and schools, educating the public about his eco form of art, the importance of recycling, and what it means to have autism.

Many children on the spectrum have fascinations and preferred topics and activities. These can easily be incorporated into their art. Gabriel Preboy of Toronto had a prodigious talent for drawing at an early age. His first obsession was buses, at age two, and he drew them regularly and well. When he was three he became fixated on dinosaurs and read every children's book available on the subject. Art is a way that Gabriel brings order and understanding to his world.

ART AS A BRIDGE

Parents often express concern about their children with autism being seen, not as they are labeled, but for the depth and breadth of who they are. Art can be a bridge for many of our children to be seen beyond their label. It also can be a bridge that connects their world with ours. ◀

FIND OUT MORE

- ▶ **The Art of Autism Collaborative Project**
the-art-of-autism.com.
- ▶ **Kevin Hosseini's website**
kevingallery.com
- ▶ **Grant Manier's website**
GrantsEcoArt.com



MEET ECO-IMPRESSIONIST GRANT MANIER

My name is Grant Manier. I am 16 years old and I have autism, which in my case, I consider a gift. My autism has made me who I am today. I am an Eco-Artist; I take thousands of recycled pieces of paper using wallpaper, magazines, food wrappers, calendars, puzzles, and more, and turn my recycled paper into art. I call my technique "paint by paper." I have been called the Eco-Impressionist, because of my mixed range of colors and materials. Today, with help from my mother, I have turned my repetitive behavior into a business for my future.

It began at a very early age; I had an obsessive repetitive behavior with paper: drawing, painting, and tearing paper for hours. My mother, Julie Coy, has been my greatest source of inspiration and support. When I was five years old and diagnosed with autism, she set out to find any information she could about what I was going to live with the rest of my life. She never made it wrong; she helped me make it right to live with autism. She showed me love, discipline, acceptance of my disability, and the strength in believing in myself.

My mother also found a school for autism that specialized in early intervention, which was the most important part of my understanding. She surrounded me with people who knew how to redirect my "out of sync" social ways. She also surrounded me with art, in school and private lessons. I don't know why Mom thought I needed more lessons in art; I loved drawing on paper...it came easy. Deep down inside she knew I had a special gift and that my autism would help me develop it.

She was right! At age 13, I turned a repetitive behavior of tearing paper into Eco-Art Masterpieces and began winning Rodeo Grand Champion awards, Houston Mayor's Recognition Awards, and was honored as the Featured Artist in art shows and museums. I also began teaching and inspiring children and adults in communities to reduce, reuse, recycle, and create eco-friendly art.

I have done many things in just two years with my art—far beyond my mother's expectations. Now, I am growing up and I need to think about my future. I am thankful that my mother told me about my autism at a young age and that she guided me into visualizing my potential.

I want people to understand, **"It's not what we can't do...It's what we can do!"**

Visit my website and help me inspire a child or adult to become environmentally responsible and paint by paper!