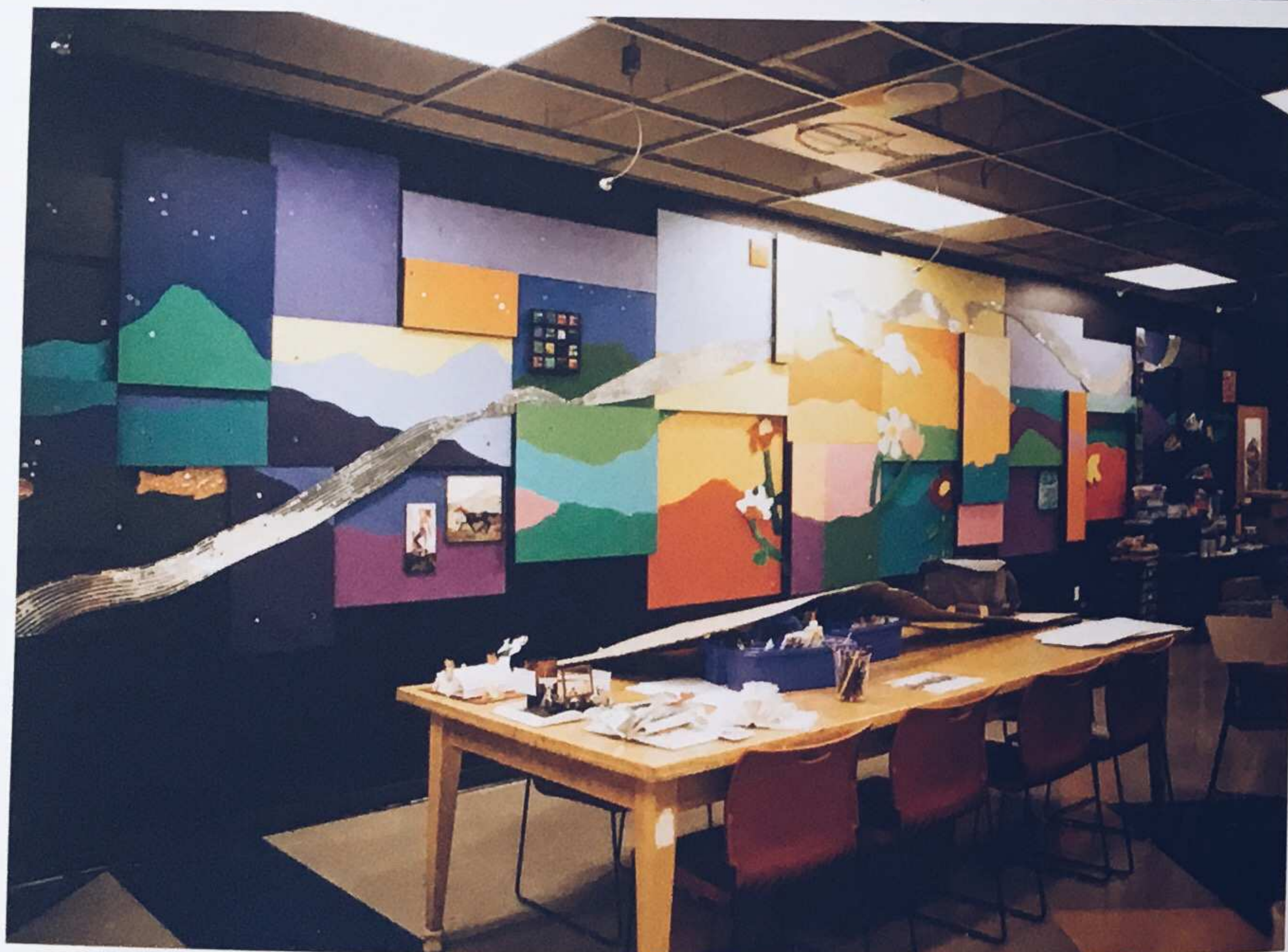
A collage of playing cards, a book, and a hat on a wooden surface. The cards are scattered across the page, with some showing faces like the Queen of Hearts and the King of Clubs. A book is visible in the background, and a white hat with a brown band is in the top right corner. The text is overlaid on the bottom left of the collage.

*Artistic Possibilities
at Goodwill's
Life-Skills Program*

Q&A WITH POSSIBILITIES STAFF MEMBERS

Words by Teryn O'Brien | Photos by Teryn O'Brien



While most of the world may have preconceived notions about who can claim the word “artist,” there are those who can see the endless possibilities art creates for anyone—including those society might easily overlook. Case in point: Discover Goodwill’s revolutionary program called Possibilities. It’s an experiential life-skills program that serves a wide array of participants with disabilities in a creative, community-oriented way.

Founded in 2012, Possibilities is housed in a large warehouse-turned-picturesque city—with sections like a Town Square, a Fitness Center, a General Store, and an Apartment that have been catered to help people with disabilities learn and reinforce over 300 functional skills. A participant might have a range of disabilities from cerebral palsy to a brain injury, a developmental delay to Down Syndrome. Age ranges vary anywhere from 18–74.

As varied as participants’ disabilities or ages might be, so too are their successes as they walk through the program and learn new life skills. Possibilities teaches skills in a variety of ways so that a participant will be able to connect with a learning style that best suits them. The curriculum is based on feedback given by participants, and there is a lot of personal investment in Possibilities by its citizens. Possibilities even has a city council where an elected official from each participant group can be a voice for what’s being taught and how it should be taught.

If it sounds pretty incredible, it gets better. A highlight of the Possibilities program is their Art Studio—lead by Art Studio Learning Leader Galen Kickingwoman—which is dedicated to teaching participants art techniques and art history through a variety of creative projects. So far, the results of this art therapy component have been astounding. Participants are blowing expectations of what they can or can’t accomplish out of the water, and their stories are inspiring.

Colorado Collective recently sat down with 3 members of the Possibilities staff to talk about the extraordinary talent they’ve seen awakened in the Art Studio: Pat Skolout, the Possibilities Program Coordinator; Rhonda Williams, a former Art Studio Instructor and current Apartment Instructor; and Cecilia Buckman, Activity Lead. The conversations were filled with passion and praise for the talented individuals who create at the Possibilities Art Studio.

Let’s talk about the Art Studio. Why did Possibilities incorporate art into your program? What is the benefit for the participants?

Rhonda Williams: The Art Studio helps give our participants an outlet for their emotions. It may not have been a good day, but then they come in here and are able to paint, or they are able to work with clay—then it becomes a great day. So it’s all about providing them the opportunity to express and then really honing in on those skills. It’s about focusing on what they can do. I tell them, “Let’s focus on what you can do and let’s build on that.” The stuff that our participants have pulled out of here is just amazing if you just give them opportunity to do it. I’m amazed everyday.

Cecilia Buckman: Art also gives our participants such a sense of working as a team. You see them just working together spontaneously as a group, and they’re just so proud of it. They just blossom. It really touches everybody’s heart when they’re able to work on the art. We simply give them the guidelines, but the participants take that opportunity to think out of the box and come up with how they want to express themselves.

Pat Skolout: It’s wonderful to see our participants expressing their emotions through art and having a sense of joy and pride with their artwork and what they can accomplish.

So what’s in your art curriculum? What are you teaching your participants everyday in the Art Studio?

PS: I love our series called Meet the Masters, where we incorporate art history. Our participants go to the Colorado Springs Fine Arts Center and see some of the paintings from the masters they’re learning about, and then they’ll do a piece in the style of that master. It’s really rewarding for them, because they get to say, “This is mine in the style of Kandinsky or in the style of Picasso.” They come out with their own creations using that history of art. They learn the various techniques—things like pointillism and cubism. Our program really runs the gamut in terms of modalities. We’ve done puppets, we’ve done drama, we’ve done clay. We try to introduce as many kinds of art that we can.

CB: We really encourage the focus groups to come up with ideas. So if they have ideas, we adapt to those ideas and what they might want to create. Now they’re bringing us ideas. Our participants understand what the concepts are, and they’re taking charge and deciding what they want to do. We also teach the art of making music, which is very important. So they express themselves with music as well.

Tell us about the Book Centerpiece Project, what it was, and how this artwork was useful therapy and expression for the students?

CB: Basically, we were asked to help create some centerpieces for Discover Goodwill's Annual Dinner, knowing what the theme was—"Be Part of the Story". We brainstormed and the outcome was so amazing. We'd take a book like Alice and Wonderland, then read the book or look at the pictures, and ask, "What does this say to you? What does this look like to you?" And then we'd help provide those resources and materials to do the books in the way the participants dreamed. At first, it was just a lot of the folding techniques, and then we went all out—origami, papier mâché, sculpture.

PS: Art therapy is really an offshoot of the projects in general. Some of the participants focused on creating different parts of the books. The repetition of folding those pages—they absolutely loved it. It was so meaningful for them. And what was also delightful about it was, of course, the teamwork that came into being. One participant might say, "Well, I might not be able to cut, but how about you cut?" So depending on who they were and what their strength was, they came together and made it happen as a team.

CB: Some of our participants enjoy completing tasks and find it gratifying. To give them those options, and for them to take that ownership was incredible. Hearing our participants say, "Here's something I'm very proud of," and to know it was for the Annual Dinner was so rewarding. As we progressed with the project, the more empowered they became.

All in all, we made 102 centerpieces from books that were going to be recycled! People at the Annual Dinner got to take them home afterwards. We took pictures of every single one and made framed collages, and they're proudly displayed in our hall.

What about the Birch Tree Project? Tell us about the project and what was so special about this particular birch tree artwork?

RW: Every winter, we do the birch trees. It's probably the most popular project that we do in the wintertime, and everybody looks forward to it. The participants take tape, and they apply it to some paper in the shape of a tree. Then they take sponges and paint, and they sponge around the tape. There are no worries about staying inside the lines. They can overlap and use as many colors as they want. I put paint out, and the participants do whatever they want to do. And when it's dry, they peel off the tape, and there's a tree. The birch marks are made with a toothbrush.

Jeff, the participant who made this particular picture, is deaf and visually impaired. He likes to look at things very closely or put it up to his eye. So when Jeff first started painting, he used only the sponge. But then he looked closely at the paper and was inspired! He made his snow, which is white pinpoint dots. Jeff did it so meticulously, and it was fun watching him—seeing what he could do when given the opportunity. When I think about it, I want to cry. I'm floored by our participants. I'm always amazed by them.

PS: When Discover Goodwill was selecting a holiday card, Jeff's artwork was chosen to represent the organization. It was chosen out of a bunch of other options. Jeff was so proud; when his mom stops by, she's delighted that his art was featured on Goodwill's holiday card.

The last project we wanted to talk about was the Wheelchair Action Art. How did this come about?

PS: It was a coordinated partnership with T. Rowe Price Investor Center. They brought in a huge, huge piece of canvas. It took up the entire hallway in the Possibilities Town Square. And they brought the paints. So think of this huge canvas. I might be in a wheelchair, so they taped off the wheelchair, and then I rolled on the canvas, then rolled on the canvas. Or I'm in a walker, Pat taped up the walker, and I can produce art. I want to do my handprint, so I dipped it in paint and added that. Maybe I didn't have use of my hands, so I contributed in another way.

Every single participant no matter what their challenges were were able to participate in this amazing project. T. Rowe Price took 10 feet of it for a huge mural for their office, and then we cut various pieces. Participants were able to take pieces home. And think about—wherever you were on the canvas, the colors were different, the styles were different. We had a footprint, the wheelchair, walkers. It was one piece of art that produced scads of amazingly different kinds of art. The whole point of it was, "It doesn't matter who you are or how you do it, you can produce art. You are an artist."

CB: I see it as this unifying artwork that everybody got to be involved in when we first moved into this building. Everyone got to be part of it.

What's 1 thing you would want readers of COCO to walk away with about your participants after reading these stories?

PS: Understanding the sense of pride and commitment that participants have and what amazing talent they have. The local community may have a limited understanding of people with these challenges or developmental disabilities. It would be so thrilling for the public to realize, "My gosh, what a wealth of talent we have here, and what amazing contributions our population can make to our community!"

We did some recycled art, and an art gallery got wind of it, and they said, "Oh my gosh, these pieces are amazing. We'll display them in our gallery." The gallery displayed their artwork. And it was like, "Wow, look what they did!" It was gallery-worthy.

CB: Possibilities participants may have been told, "You can't do this, you can't do that." And it's priceless to be able to tell them, "You know what? You can and you will. So let's just not even go there and just do it." Once they get that, the sky's the limit. My feeling is they're not disabled, they have a special ability. And if that special ability catches fire, you better watch and bar the door. Because they can just take you places that you've never been before as far as their artwork.

And that's how I really felt with some of the Book Centerpieces. By the time I looked at some of the books and what they were creating, I felt like I was part of that story. They really encompassed that theme and created beautiful stories. The whole Possibilities program—to see the changes, to see where they've come—is just so beautiful. ●

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