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AriArt redefines lives of young adults with autism

Cheryl Zink Coltin never dreamed that beads would colour the way to a better life for her autistic son.

The small components made of beautiful Italian glass, handmade African, Indian and Peruvian ceramic, patterned fimo clay and even Swarovski crystals are the tools in trade for AriArt, a therapeutic workshop for young autistic adults. With beads, they create not only jewelry but also objets d'art and anything else they can beautify by adding beads, from salad servers to sink stoppers.

The project was launched almost three years ago to take up the slack after these young adults graduate from school, leaving them with nowhere to go but back into the enclosed world of parental care. With college not often an option, these creative, intelligent people "need a place where they can continue growing and learning," says Coltin.

She indicates a lush display that ranges from fine necklaces, bracelets and earrings to fruit skewers, bookmarks and decorative

bowls twined with copper wire and spangled with beads. "The bowls are my son Ari's specialty," says Coltin, who initially drew him into sharing her enthusiasm for beading, as an after-school activity. Having graduated from Summit School this past spring, 21-year-old Ari joined his namesake art atelier full time, and his mother sees his level of motivation has improved and his ability to co-operate with others greatly increased.

It's a very different picture from the heart-wrenching day when 18-month-old Ari was suddenly unresponsive to questions. "I thought he'd gone deaf. He was sitting on the floor in the sunroom, and I ran outside and banged on the window to get his attention. He still didn't react," says Coltin, who believes the measles, mumps, rubella vaccine he'd received two weeks earlier was the environmental trigger that set off his genetic predisposition to autism.

The neurological disorder that prevents a person from reacting normally to stimuli and

from connecting to others manifests itself in Ari as pacing back and forth, making noises and talking to himself. Philadelphia-born Coltin and her husband, Elliot, took him to all the leading American and Canadian experts, but Coltin finally gave up her own practice as a psychologist to devote herself to teaching her son what she could "to make him as functional as he can be."

Coltin met her partner in AriArt, special care counsellor Patricia Williams and Williams' husband, Ross, early on when they worked with Ari at Giant Steps Montreal.

To date, Coltin and Williams have held two AriArt summer camps for autistic participants aged 16 to 20. "They've been all guys because there are just more boys diagnosed with autism than girls. Girls would most certainly be welcome," says Coltin. Activities include beading, papermaking, hiking, swimming and photography.

"Last year, all their pictures sold. We had them in frames that they decorated," says Coltin. Williams taught them to finger-knit, a technique that Ari uses to make Hamsa amulet keychains. "We're having home parties to sell their art," she says. "We also do conferences and bazaars. A lot of it is word-of-mouth, and people phone when they need a special gift for an occasion."

The AriArt website, www.ariat.ca, features a number of items made by the members, but these have been sold. A volunteer website manager to keep the items updated and set up a purchase system is on AriArt's wish list. Proceeds are pumped back into art supplies, and fund the not-for-profit camp and year-round workshops currently held either at Coltin or Williams' homes.

"Our next step is we need a sponsor who has a storefront that they're not renting, to donate to us," says Coltin who, like Williams, uses her basement and garage for the group's storage requirements. "Our vision is to have a workshop in the front where people can come in and see these guys creating, in a visible



Pat Williams, left, and Cheryl Zink Coltin display some of the AriArt creations.

[Heather Solomon photo]

place. We don't want them hidden away somewhere. The most important thing is for them to have a sense of belonging and for people to accept them."

The ideal venue would have a kitchen where the artists can prepare their lunches and, in the future, make sandwiches and coffee for a café corner. "The point is to get the community to come in so these young people can be part of what's going on instead of set aside," says Coltin.

Ari has three "normal" siblings. Older sister Hallie, 24, is in her fourth year of medical school at McGill University. Noah, 19, is in the Israeli army. Taylor, 16, is going into Grade 11 at Bialik High School. "My kids are kind and empathetic, with Ari for a brother," says Coltin. "Now we need support from other families, people who want to get involved. There are a lot of young autistic adults out there and not enough services."

Coltin is making a difference with AriArt and its motto, Art for Autism's Sake. "My son is very disabled. But look what he can do," she says. "Look what we can do, together, all of us! We can make beautiful things and make other people happy."

For more information, contact Coltin at cherylzink@hotmail.com.

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