



Board president and co-founder of Making Light Productions, Juliet Yaques, says that in many ways Zoom meetings are shedding light on the communication breakdown that the disability community confronts every day. SPECIAL TO THE DEMOCRAT

Across the SPECTRUM

LEARNING BY DOING GETS ‘CREATIVE JUICES’ FLOWING

Amanda Sieradzki Council on Culture & Arts

Disembodied faces hover in a grid and serve as a stark reminder that social meeting places and routines have rapidly reformed. Theater, music and art classrooms are no exception, as the screen’s harsh glow strips away familiar physical and social cues interrupted by glitches or technological failures. • Children and adults alike are becoming energetically drained as they succumb to “Zoom fatigue,” whether it’s during an overwhelming succession of business meetings, school activities or performing arts rehearsals. Board president and co-founder of Making Light Productions Juliet Yaques says that in many ways, these trends are shedding light on the communication breakdown that the disability community confronts every day. • “A lot of children on the autism spectrum understand the challenges that everyone is having right now with communication because that’s how they feel a lot of the time,” says Yaques. “They don’t get the body language signals and eye contact. We’re very mindful of that which is why we have made all these other methods of instruction available.” **See SPECTRUM, Page 6C**

Spectrum

Continued from Page 1C

Yaques' daughter is a young artist with autism and was her primary motivation behind launching a visual and performing arts nonprofit organization for all abilities with co-founder Amanda Broadfoot in 2016. When the COVID-19 pandemic shut down their normal operations mid-March, they quickly switched gears for their spring and summer season.

Private lessons and group classes in theater, dance, art and music were shifted online, while still producing a full season of original shows. These include the wacky, at-home hygiene musical, "The Show Must Go Online" which premiered on June 10 and a joint art-theater effort in making "Alice's Adventures in Wonderland" on June 19 as a puppet show.

In addition to online meetings, Yaques says teachers have packaged their lessons using learning tools that allow students to read and watch materials independently.

"Children that I thought really loved performing in front of an audience do even better without one, when they get to record shows in their own time," says Yaques. "That's something we will keep in mind as we move forward with all these new options for adaptability that we can incorporate into shows. Audiences will see a lot more leveraging of technology to make theater more accessible."

Arts4All Florida Regional Program Coordinator Dr. Susan Baldino says they have taken a similar approach with their student and adult classes and exhibitions. Arts4All Florida has provided educational arts programming for artists with disabilities for 37 years throughout the state, and Baldino is a fierce advocate for tolerance, acceptance and access for all.

She has witnessed a significant shift in how digital programming opens up possibilities for students while also challenging organizations to find even more equitable methods of engaging the community.

This has taken the shape of virtual exhibitions like "Art Futures" and "We All Need Each Other," which features classroom artist residencies from across the state, as well as Arts4All's new Time4Art lesson plans and resources for parents, and their "Spotlight

on Art" video series led by teaching artists in a variety of disciplines.

"These resources not only explain techniques, but demonstrate them in step-by-step videos," says Baldino. "It's all about the notion of learning by doing, being hands on and leaving it open for students' creative juices to take it away."

Teaching artist Megan Holmes Cameron was recently spotlighted for a video on sketching mandalas inspired by nature. Isolated at home, Cameron found herself gardening more. She said the act of making the mandalas soothed pandemic-related anxieties, and as a board-certified arts therapist, she was eager to share this tool with a wider audience.

Cameron presented a variety of physical adaptations and closed captioning in her video, and applied many of these same accommodations to her classes at the Florida State University Center for Autism and Related Disabilities —offered as a part of Arts4All's career arts planning program—which wrapped up in a virtual setting in May.

"They could still feel connected to people while social distancing and have a supportive environment to explore their identity as artists," says Cameron. "They encouraged one another to see the value in their work and know their voice is unique and needs to be shared with the world."

Cameron was not only impressed by her students' artistic abilities by the end of the program, but also with their capacity to care for one another and herself as the facilitator when things went awry. If videos failed or students did not have sound, they jumped on the chat function. Emails were continuously exchanged to share ongoing art projects and accommodate students who didn't have cameras.

Though the inherent value of face-to-face interactions can never be fully replaced, she took their willingness to adapt to everyone's unique technological abilities as an important lesson in patience and accommodation.

While Arts4All will stay virtual for now, Making Light Productions is forging ahead with a hybrid of online productions and in-person camps throughout June and July. Yaques is grateful to the families that have stuck with them even while apart, and says increased safety measures such as temperature checks, smaller groups, and adjusted audience seating will mark a new normal as they return to the stage.

"Theater is known for having a place



Teaching artist Megan Holmes Cameron was recently spotlighted for a video on sketching mandalas inspired by nature. SPECIAL TO THE DEMOCRAT

for everybody and being tolerant of everyone's differences," says Yaques. "There's a lot of momentum to save small businesses, but nonprofits need help, too. I hope people consider that they want these things to continue to be produced and enjoyed after this time is over, and we can't do that without help to bring us over to the other side."

For Baldino, regardless of the delivery methods, every arts and disabilities program bear an even greater message.

"We can't let our fight wane," says Baldino. "There are still people who, when you walk into a room and you are different, will turn their heads, not accept you. Those minds need to be opened and made aware. They need to see the beautiful art and the talents peoples with disabilities can express."

For more information on Arts4All's At Home Activities, visit its Facebook Group.

To learn more about Making Light Productions summer camps and socially distant performances, visit makinglightproductions.org.

Amanda Sieradzki is the feature writer for the Council on Culture & Arts. COCA is the capital area's umbrella agency for arts and culture (www.tallahasseearts.org). This article is part of COCA's Creativity Persists collection which highlights how our community uses the arts to stay connected and inspired during the COVID-19 pandemic.