

The Ability to Identify as an Artist First

How People Incorporated's Artability Program Challenges Mental Health Stigma

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Artability humbly began 25 years ago in a church basement with a few instructors and participants and it has grown to be a robust, integral part of People Incorporated. It gives hundreds of individuals the ability to identify as artists each year through more than 550 free workshops and an annual art show and sale. Also, through collaborations with other organizations in the Twin Cities art community, Artability allows individuals' identities as artists to expand to budding, independent entrepreneurs. Artability programming coordinator Corilyn Wagner creates the schedule, teaches many of the classes, and connects artists to galleries, special events, art crawls, and creates opportunities for artists to sell their original art and prints of their work.

"When people come to Artability classes, they have a sense of community support and they get to do something creative and try something new," says Wagner. "I think trying new things and exploring new artistic mediums has a great power to it. It allows people to really be courageous and put themselves out there."

This bravery and confidence created through the workshops makes taking the

next step toward participating in the annual Artability Art Show and Sale every October less intimidating. The show and sale, which is open to the public, gives artists the ability to display and sell their artwork to the community. Within this idyllic setting, their identities as artists evolve from solitary personal expressions or feelings, to a public stage where they share their talents and abilities with the world. This opportunity provides artists with an immense sense of validation, pride, strength, dignity, and respect in who they are and who they want to be. The depth of emotions communicated in their art reflects relatable, human experiences that anyone can understand, giving them a powerful voice in their recovery that also dually helps shatter mental health stigmas.

In 2018, more than 160 artists displayed nearly 600 works of art, from paintings, charcoal, drawings, graphic works, and sculptures, as part of the three-day Artability Art Show and Sale within the grand, austere, gallery atmosphere of the Great Hall in St. Paul. Writers also contributed their creative work to an anthology available for sale at the show. Artists receive 80 percent of

the proceeds from the sale of their work at the show and 20 percent goes toward Artability programming.

Jill Wiedmann-West, who started as People Incorporated's Chief Operating Officer in 2010 and was later promoted to CEO in 2014, re-envisioned the show from an intimate activity to a life-altering, transcending, large public event along with the help of Barbara Nichols, who sat on the organization's board of directors.

"We wanted to build the show to the next level," Wiedmann-West said. "This is an incredibly important program for our clients and the community. I wanted to see where we could take it. I wanted it to grow in terms of scope, size, number of artists — and impact."

In 2019, its 25th anniversary year, People Incorporated's Artability Art Show and Sale is expanding further, opening its doors to more artists, fun activities and celebratory experiences that honor the creativity and contributions of people living with mental illnesses and the program's rich, awe-inspiring history.

"For anyone who is struggling on a day-to-day basis, living with any kind of pain or illness that makes them feel different than others — art is a great equalizer," Wiedmann-West said. "You see these people at the show who have had a life of struggles and then you see stickers on their art that says it has been purchased. The enthusiasm in the room is just so wonderful."

No one understands the depth of the show's history, its deep impact or its equalizing effect greater than Mike Conroy, who has been involved in every role including Artability artist, show planner, instructor and advisory committee member since 2001. His expressionistic, cityscape paintings, which have become an iconic, popular Artability show staple, have helped him recover from his



own mental health challenges. He also enjoys seeing people consistently come to his workshops because he says they can really learn amazing skills and there is something for everyone. Yet it is the Artability Art Show and Sale where it all comes together.

"The art goes from artist to the show, from the show to the people, and from the people to the world. It's about recovery," Conroy exclaimed.

Melanie, a People Incorporated client added, "If you can present something through a poem or through visual art, and people accept that — then there's mastery being built."

Artability is ultimately about recovery and giving people a purpose in life and something to offer the world. It's about acceptance. It's about the ability to dream big and to choose one's path. It's about reminding people living with a mental illness that the ability to identify as amazing, successful artists is possible. Anything is possible when people and organizations are open to collaboration.

To learn more about People Incorporated's Artability programming, visit: www.peopleincorporated.org/get-involved/artability/.

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