

# Art, Autism and a Life Purpose

by *Diana J. Ensign*

## Local artist finds receptive audience

At age 23, not many young men or women can boast of art shows at the Indianapolis Art Center, Starbucks, Conner Prairie, the Broad Ripple Student Art Fair, B-Java coffeehouse, and Artifacts—to name just a few. Sean Gray, in addition to those accolades, also won Best in the Beginners Division of the student show at the Indianapolis Art Center in 2005. Sean may suffer from severe autism, but if you ask him, he will give you a huge smile and unabashedly announce that he is an artist and “artists can do what they want!”

## Work in progress

In the ceramics room at the Indianapolis Art Center, Sean arrives wearing a bright orange fleece shirt and a gigantic grin. The clothing of his teacher, Rick Greiner, is splattered with wet clay. Rick says, “Sean has made a birthday cake, a clock fountains, lady bugs, and owl masks.” He sets out Sean’s bird fountain, with terracotta, and a flowerpot. Sean decides the flowerpot will be purple. Next, Sean heads to the pottery wheel. Rick puts down a block of clay and gets it ready. He then turns the wheel over to Sean who shapes the clay into an Ichibana (a Japanese vase). The clay takes form rapidly and beautifully, like magic. As Sean stands to retrieve another block of clay, Rick readies the wheel for a new piece. “They make a good team,” his mom says. At the table, Sean turns to her. “Mom, I need more clay.” He looks at her and she nods yes. A few minutes later he repeats the request. “Mom, I need more clay.” She smiles and says, “Yes, more clay.” Soon, they are off to purchase a large, unmolded block of clay.

## Autism

Born in 1983, Sean Gray was first diagnosed with autism when he was 11 years old. As his mom explains, “He didn’t speak until he was 4 and then he only had a 20 word vocabulary. He made lots of sounds and thought we could understand but we couldn’t.” Sylvia Gray took her son to have his hearing checked because, as she says, he was always holding his hands over his ears. “They said there was nothing wrong with his hearing. He would never hold still, and he didn’t have very good balance, like a Frankenstein walk. Not all people with autism are the same,” she adds. “But when he wasn’t talking, we took him to vocational rehab and they couldn’t really test him because the test is all based on speech. They thought he was moderately retarded.” She shrugs. “But Sean would know

things, like if I was driving the wrong way. He also did things faster than normal. He had good fine-motor skills; he would feed himself and put things in order. He was neat. He just couldn't stay focused."

Finally, Sean's parents learned that Sean's brain is normal but the brain stem is affected, so he has trouble paying attention. She continues, "He had obsessive/compulsive behavior. For instance, he wanted blue note cards and if he didn't get them, he would yell and scream, bite and hit, like he was dying. I learned he really felt like he was dying. He would have an obsession where he would tear paper. The obsession was to deal with the outside noise; it helped him cope. He would watch the Wheel of Fortune and if he missed it, he would throw a fit, get violent." She pauses. "I could upset him if I talked a lot and tried to explain. It's not a good way to work with him because he is trying to pick up words and it would make him angry."

Not surprisingly, Sean experienced problems in high school. "They didn't know as much back then about autistic students," she says. "Sean liked to see expressions on people's faces. Even if it was a negative expression, he liked to see it. He didn't understand the socialization. Kids would say to tell the teacher to shut up and he would see her reaction and he would keep doing it. I told the teachers to ignore it and to work on rewarding positive behavior, but it was hard for them." She realized, "In high school, the only class Sean could take with the other students was the sculpture class." In 2001, she began searching for ways Sean could continue with his sculpture work.

## **Art**

Sylvia met Rick Greiner in 2003 and knew he would be a great teacher for Sean. She says, "I was looking for an instructor that had dealt with special needs. Rick has a background in social work." She pauses. "Sean has trouble staying on task. He has a sensory disorder — noise, sounds, distract him real easy. He needs to work in short spurts. He works quickly; but he doesn't stay real long. I knew he would work best one-on-one." She adds: "I thought artists would be more tolerant of uniqueness or eccentricity."

Rick acknowledges the challenges and rewards of teaching. He says the challenge is "being patient with being asked the same questions." Sean's mom explains that people with autism tend to ask questions they know the answer to, as a way to control the situation. "He likes to joke a lot," Rick adds. "In the beginning Sean was quiet, but he talks so much now, it's a complete land. It helps him make relationships."

Sean's mom explains that Sean is focused when working with art. She says, "I'm not sure how Rick does it, but Sean will do five or six pieces in an hour, basic clay work. Rick can tell when he needs a break and then they'll take a walk and look at other art." She notes that they work well together. "It's a collaborative effort."

## **Opening day**

At B-Java's coffeehouse, Sean greets friends and family who stop by for the art opening. He is wearing a Colts sweatshirt. His ceramic work is displayed in the front entrance. Midnight blue, deep sea green and bronze bowls line the wall, some with mirrors, some with spirals and some with earthen clay for edging. The pieces sell quickly.

A man surveys the work on the wall. "Very, very good," he says to Sean. Another man shakes Sean's hand, and says, "Excellent."

One man orders four mirror pieces. Sean looks over at his mom, "A hundred dollars!" he announces. She nods. Sean repeats with enthusiasm, "A hundred dollars!" She nods again, "Yes."

Rick sits across from Sean. He joins in the fun. "What did you get?" he asks Sean. Sean claps his hands: "A hundred dollars."

"What will you do with it?" Rick smirks slyly.

Sean beams: "Deposit it!"

His mom laughs. "That's their running joke," she says. "Sean gets really excited when he sells his work. I think he enjoys selling it as much as making it." She nods appreciatively. "Sean has no trouble selling his work because he doesn't care what people think, he just says, 'You want it? Buy it.'"

Sean hurries over behind the counter and asks to ring up the sales himself on the cash register. The owner of B-Java's gladly shows Sean how to swipe a credit card through the machine. Everyone here is abuzz with the excitement Sean generates with every sale.

Sean's teacher calls out, "Artists do what they want, right Sean?"

Sean grins. "Yes!"

## **Art makes a difference**

Sean's dad, Brad Gray, sits comfortably during the art opening, occasionally getting up to take a piece of work down or put a new piece up. He says, "Art has definitely made a difference for Sean. It's a way for him to express himself, because verbally he has a lot of trouble." Brad glances toward Rick. "When Sean gets done with Rick, he's in a calmer space, more at peace. It makes him feel real comfortable doing that work. His behavior is

much much better. He used to be violent.” Brad pauses. “Like anyone with autism, he has good days and bad days, a roller coaster. But the hills are not as high and valleys not as deep.” He notes that Sean is very tactile. “He likes touching. Clay appeals to him. He can squeeze it.” Brad mentions that it’s important for Sean to also have a relationship with a man, not just women. “In schooling, for a long time, he was just around women. With Rick, he has a chance to have a relationship with a man.”

Sean’s parents contribute much of Sean’s improvement to art. Brad says, “Sean used to be on 10 meds. He’s on one now. We also eliminated processed food.” Brad notes, “We all have autistic tendencies, with Sean it’s just to the next level. Art gives him a sense of purpose. That’s important to him. And if you talk to him, he’s an artist. He likes to have a task to concentrate on, that helps him. He’s a really social person. He likes the people and he feels confident. He may take a regular class with others. That would be a huge step for him.”

His mom nods. “Sean puts his whole heart into his work.”

“He enjoys some independence,” Brad joins in. “He loves having a purpose.”

A customer pauses next to a piece of Sean’s work. “What do the red dots mean?” she asks Sean.

“Sold,” Sean says. He turns toward his mom, “People pay me now, right Mom!”

She laughs. “Yes, Sean. People pay you now.”

*For more info:*

<http://www.seanware.com/>

*This article originally appeared in Nuvo Newspaper. Find it online at :*

<http://www.nuvo.net/indianapolis/art-autism-and-a-life-purpose/Content?oid=1268592>

---