

by B. Madeleine Goldfarb

All the world's a stage according to Shakespeare. Perhaps that is true, but for people living with Autism Spectrum Disorders (ASD), the idea of a theater program may seem at first paradoxical.

Let the play begin.

Life for many individuals living with ASD can be very complicated with complex social and emotional challenges. The difficulty in reading, understanding and reacting appropriately to social cues is well known and widely documented. How then will these individuals use theater? At its core, theater is the transmission of emotion, conflict and resolution... in short, life's very real daily drama in a safe environment. How wonderful to be able to engage and "practice" all things social/ emotional on a stage. From practice...perhaps we can affect daily life.

Unusual therapy to be sure, but the beginning of the process comes from a desire to organize a group of like-minded individuals on the spectrum. When the student is ready the teacher will arrive," (anonymous quote.)



Paul Voss, DJF Self-Advocate, inspired the adult theater program

An articulate young man living with Asperger Syndrome (part of the ASD spectrum) named Paul had a vision. His vision was to have a theater program with others on the spectrum. There are theater programs around, yet there was not one anywhere that focused on adults age 21 years and older living with ASD. Paul is a member of The Daniel Jordan Fiddle Foundation Self-Advocate Advisory Board and part of his role is to bring new program ideas to Linda Walder Fiddle, the Executive Director of the organization. Paul and Linda discussed how such a program could be implemented. The Daniel Jordan Fiddle Foundation developed a game plan for collaboratively developing this unique program that would serve Paul and his peers who are in the their late 20s and early 30s.

Linda put together the collaborative partnership that would make up the team for piloting **The Daniel Jordan Fiddle Foundation Theater Program at the Garage Theater Company for Adults on the Spectrum**. The Autism Center provided the consulting and program advice as they had previously created similar programs with Montclair State University. The Garage Theater Group, under the direction of Michael Bias, did not have formal experience with the ASD population, but was willing and immediately on board with the idea of giving this program a home base.

Autism is like an onion, with layers and layers of communication difficulties waiting to be peeled away. When you find the vehicle to help peel those layers away, more often than not, what you find is the indomitable spirit of a beautiful mind with so much potential that the teacher becomes the student. And so it was with this program.

Open to adults living with ASD the group was formed. Age was more of a factor than functioning level, as it was imperative to Paul's vision that the program accommodated adults. The group consisted of very high functioning Asperger's individuals with more moderately functioning individuals with more profound ASD impairments. The commonality was a love of theater and a willingness and desire to act. The initial anxiety of joining in a new group experience gave way to self discovery and enthusiasm. The able direction of Michael Bias and the trust and support of the fellow actors was extraordinary.

Give me the opportunity to grow in the light...and I will amaze you. And they did. Not only did the actors amaze us all, but they amazed themselves as well. The profound ability for theater to change lives for the better and enrich us all is not lost here. It is important to continue to offer this type of programming to the ASD community, as it is not only life changing and affirming for the participants, it also changes our perception of the possible for us all.

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