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Artists share their talent at annual show

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Contributor

Throughout the year, participants in the Art in the Park project attended weekly sessions to learn about different techniques and styles before creating their own works of art. Their finished pieces culminated in an exhibition at the 4th annual Art Show at the Hemet Public Library on March 26.

The artists are adults with developmental disabilities from various programs offered by the nonprofit EXCEED, which provides advocacy, educational, vocational, job placement services and life skills training. The Art in the Park project began in 2021 through a City of Hemet Community Development Block Grant.

Title Sponsors for this year's show were the City of Hemet and the Soboba Foundation. Representatives from both groups were treated to a pre-show guided tour by Sandra Aldridge, who oversees Marketing & Resource Development for EXCEED. Several of the artists shared their works with the group as they made their way around the impressive display at the library's upstairs area. From sculptures and paintings to drawings and handiworks, the colorful collection reflected the creativity and individuality of the artists through more than 35 projects.

Art facilitator Nancy Espensen finds new ways to allow clients to express themselves each year. She also mixes a little art history into her lessons to give more meaning to the artists' work they are emulating. This year's inspirations included Emmi Whitehorse, Ines Alvidres, Sandra Silberzweig, James Rizzi, Dean Russo, and Ugo Rondinone.

Artist Jon B. said Espensen is a tremendous art teacher. "I have a lot of respect for her," he said. "I love being in her class and creating new art."

Occasionally, lessons cannot be held outdoors at Mary Henley Park in Hemet due to inclement weather and Espensen seizes the opportunity to share a video about a famous artist who showcases their work. One of those was Rondinone, who inspired two different lessons. "Our artists studied the creation of the Seven Magic Mountains, his iconic installation outside of Las Vegas," Espensen said. "This project focused on exploring scale, color, and composition in a playful, large-scale project."

Speaking of large scale, guests to the art show were greeted by long tables at the entrance filled with sculptures inspired by Ugo Rondinone's "Human Nature" installation at Rockefeller Center. "Using large pieces of floral foam, they sculpted the human figures starting with the legs, ensuring each was of the same height," Espensen said. As they completed the sculpture, they needed to make sure the piece was balanced and able to stand independently. The sculptures were then covered with masking tape and layered with plaster cloth strips dipped in water. Once dry, the artists carefully assembled the figures, checking stability with each addition. After applying a gray paint base and a layer of metallic paints, they were able to blend highlights that mimicked the natural veining of boulders, which was Rondinone's medium of choice.

"The results were striking, sculptural figures that combined careful engineering with artistic expression," Espensen said. "It was a great lesson in balance and self-correction. I loved watching them concentrate as they built." Artist Michael Bussell liked all the art sessions, especially those involving sculpting. His "Human Nature" form was front and center at the show and he said he really enjoyed creating it. "I like big projects," he said. "I love the challenges."

Soboba Foundation president Andy Silvas said it was a wonderful experience to tour the EXCEED Art Show.

"The talent, creativity, and individuality of the artists were truly inspiring," he said. "What I enjoyed most was seeing how meaningful this program is for the individuals involved and having the chance to meet some of the artists whose lives are being positively impacted through their work. EXCEED is clearly a program that



Hanging and tabletop lanterns were created by EXCEED's Art in the Park participants to celebrate the Chinese New Year.

Valley News/Diane A. Rhodes photo



"Seven Magic Mountains," inspired by Ugo Rondinone add color to the table as "Pop Art Animals," inspired by Dean Russo, hang in frames in the background at the 4th annual Art Show presented by EXCEED.

Valley News/Diane A. Rhodes photo



Artists from the Adult Developmental Center show off their sculptures and certificates at the 4th annual Art Show presented by EXCEED. They are joined by Casa del Valle Program Manager Valerie Fleming, center.

Valley News/Diane A. Rhodes photo

fosters creativity, confidence, and community."

Soboba Foundation secretary Joseph Placencia said he enjoyed the Foundation board being treated to a walk through prior to the public opening at 3 p.m. "It was great getting to see all of the beautiful artwork done by these amazing artists; a hands-on chance to learn about their processes and influences," he said. "The tour was full of all the insights and accompanied by a few of the featured artists themselves. A good time was had."

Dondi Silvas, Soboba Foundation treasurer, enjoyed seeing the creativity and teamwork behind the many projects. "The event gives artists a meaningful space to share their talents with the community, and you can feel their pride in every piece," she said. "Hearing the artists talk about their process, emotions, and inspiration added so much depth to the experience. Their openness reminded us why this show matters: it celebrates expression, connection, and the incredible work happening within the EXCEED community."

Among those sharing their work was Michael Arellanes. Despite his visual impairment, his creations are thought-provoking and deeply meaningful to him. One of his favorite projects was his "Mini Me" sculpture inspired by Dale Chihuly. The artists traced their hands onto shrink film and decorated their handprints with marking pens, adding patterns and colors. The film pieces were baked to reduce their size. They also painted plastic cups, bowls, and plates with black and white paint, then used a heat gun to melt and mold the pieces. Finally,

they assembled the components into a three-dimensional structure, securing everything with hot glue to create a dynamic, mixed-media sculpture.

Espensen said this project was also about building trust through the process. Working one-on-one with Arellanes, she watched him fall in love with the process after being hesitant to use a heat gun. "Watching him navigate through the process was pretty special," she said. "One of the pieces felt like a heart so he wanted that placed in the center and another piece felt like a crown to him and he wanted that put at the top, saying that's how he pictures his crown when he gets to heaven. And then he began to sing Holy, Holy, Holy. I enjoy it when I get to have those moments with the clients."

Aldridge and Espensen curated the exhibition, figuring out how many frames and tables were going to be needed and what the feature should be. It took about one and one-half days to set up with the help of about 30 volunteers, staff and clients. Refreshments were available at a sitting area where everyone could relax and visit with friends, family members, and all visitors to the show.

Espensen facilitates four different classes each week. She explores lesson plans through an online community of art teachers for projects that seem best suited for her clients. She then makes some adjustments to ensure all levels of students can benefit from the lesson. "I love certain techniques," she said. "Some resonate, and some don't, but I always like to challenge the artists in new ways."



Before the Art Show opened to the public, Title Sponsors were given a guided tour with a few of the artists. From left, Joseph Placencia and Andy Silvas from Soboba Foundation, Hemet City Council Member Connie Howard-Clark with artist Andrea, artists Michael and Noel, Soboba Foundation's Dondi Silvas and Hemet City Council Member Jackie Peterson.

Valley News/Courtesy photo



Art facilitator Nancy Espensen with EXCEED artist Michael Arellanes and his "Mini Me" sculpture inspired by Dale Chihuly. Above the table is a collaborative project of "Chandeliers," also inspired by Chihuly.

Valley News/Diane A. Rhodes photo



Artist Michael Bussell displays his "Human Nature" sculpture inspired by Ugo Rondinone at the Hemet Public Library, March 26.

Valley News/Diane A. Rhodes photo

Although some projects are completed in steps over the period of a few weeks, the "Snowmen" took about five weeks to finish. A mix of painted and scrapbooking papers, along with water-soluble oil pastels, was used to create a vibrant collage. After the snowmen were drawn and whitewash was applied to bring them to life, artists were provided with scarf and hat cutouts, which they traced onto textured paper of their choice, adding a personal touch. They added buttons, a nose, and carefully drew their eyes and mouth. They added glitter, sticks, and other three-dimensional elements, giving each piece a playful, dynamic charm. "It was a fun project that turned out incredible," Espensen said. "They were used on our Christmas cards this year."

A popular project was creating "Pop Art Animals." Several artists cited this as their favorite lesson. They were given the option of a guided drawing with step-by-step instructions of an elephant or a lion. They then traced their final drawing with black marking pen to create bold outlines and definition. Using white and fluorescent oil pastels and a watercolor wash, they added vibrant patterns and shapes inspired by Dean Russo, resulting in expressive, colorful animal portraits that combine structure with creativity. The layering of bright oil pastels against the strong black lines enhances contrast and brings energy and movement to the finished work.

"I chose the lion; I love big creatures," artist Nicole Yoder said. "I like learning new things. I love a good adventure." She recalled

decorating a jewelry box when she was younger and said she has always been a creative person.

City of Hemet Council Member Jackie Peterson found the talent of the group to be amazing. She said Aldridge and Espensen gave a wonderful tour of the clients' artwork and explained the process for each outing. "The clients are very imaginative and are taught so many skills along the way," Peterson said. "We had the privilege of talking with three of them on the tour, and their enthusiasm is infectious. They love this program and enjoy the camaraderie and experience. I've seen this art show several years now, and it never disappoints."

State Farm Insurance agent Valerie Tichy-Drummer was visiting for the first time, and she was proud to be a sponsor. "It's a great organization and I was very impressed with the event," she said. "I love celebrating artistic talent and I will be supporting it in the future, for sure."

Kyocera Account Executive Lorenza Mejia said his company was honored to have served as a sponsor for the exceptionally well-attended event. He said it showcased an impressive range of artistic works, highlighting the depth of talent within the community. "Kyocera proudly supports initiatives that celebrate creativity and innovation," he said. "We look forward to participating again next year."

For more information, www.weexceed.org and #EXCEED-ARTSHOW2026.