

Art in the Park sessions culminate in Art Show

By
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April 21, 2023



The Hemet Public Library was ablaze with color and creativity as nearly 40 artists from EXCEED's Art in the Park sessions displayed their works at an Art Show on March 30. The Art in the Park project began in July 2021 through a successful application for City of Hemet Community Development Block Grant funding.

EXCEED is a nonprofit that sought funds to provide a meaningful art experience for adults with disabilities to foster inspiration, community integration and good health. The organization has provided advocacy, educational, vocational, job placement services and life skills training to adults with disabilities since 1979. Its many programs include supported employment, adult work experience, community integrated services, exploration and enrichment services and Adult Development Centers in Hemet and Perris.

The Art in the Park project stresses the importance of the process and expression, rather than the technical aspects of the final product, and is intended to foster communication, cognitive and manual skills, self-esteem, a sense of autonomy and develop social interaction in a community setting.

All 130 sessions from the past year have been held at Mary Henley Park in Hemet, weather permitting. Sandra Aldridge, who handles Marketing & Resource Development for EXCEED, said the number of sessions was increased to three per week in January, due to demand.

"Art is a viable way of expressing emotions and feelings, especially when someone isn't able to do so through traditional means," Aldridge said. "As a result, most people with developmental disabilities respond very well to artistic activities. This program promotes the belief that everyone has the potential to use art materials and to be creative and expressive, regardless of training or experience."

The Art Show was structured much like an open house where guests could come anytime during the three-hour event to view the array of artworks and visit with many of the artists. The results of 20 different techniques that had been introduced to the artists were grouped together with works by featured artists for each one displayed front and center. The EXCEED board of directors judged the works without knowing who the artists were so they could be objective in choosing who to feature.

Board Vice President Quinn Hawley has been serving since 2005 and enjoyed seeing all the different processes the artists had been exposed to. "I really like the way they handled color," he said.

For three separate creations over the period of a month, program participants learned about color mixing. Each one was given only red, yellow and blue colors to work with in watercolor, pastel or acrylic. From seasonal projects such as "Fall Leaves," "Reindeer" and "Sunflowers," to specific techniques inspired by well-known artists, the variety was endless.

The works "Inspired by Dale Chihuly" which greeted visitors who entered the Art Show event, proved to be a real crowd pleaser. The American glass artist and entrepreneur is best known in the field of blown glass "moving it into the realm of large-scale sculptures." Program participants were introduced to Chihuly's unique work through videos and books. They collaborated with each other to create huge chandeliers that dangled over the table that held their individual creations and was the focal point of the Art Show.

Hemet Mayor Pro Tem Malcolm Lilienthal found it to be the favorite medium he encountered when he attended the event. "The awe-inspiring and mesmerizing Chihuly-inspired chandeliers were crafted from repurposed plastic water bottles. This ingenious method showcased the students' incredible creativity and talent and emphasized the importance of sustainability and environmental consciousness," he said. "I was blown away. I knew the students were doing awesome stuff but wow; just wow!"

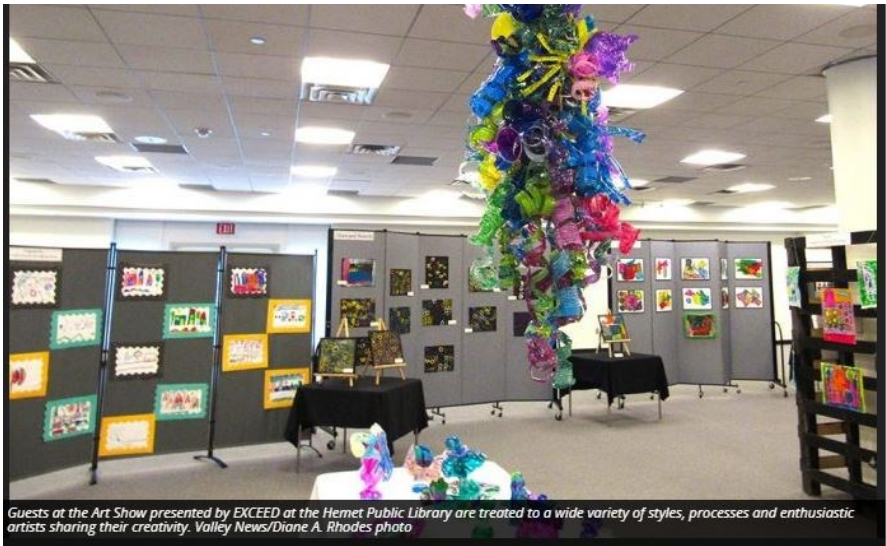
Elaine Morris, of Hemet, was chosen as a featured artist for her contribution to the "Geometric Shapes Inspired by Kandinsky" process. "I like the teacher and techniques we do," she said of the Art in the Park sessions.

Aldridge said EXCEED staff gives a special thanks to art facilitator Nancy Espensen for her dedication and commitment to the program and its participants. "She has worked tirelessly to help them unlock their creativity and this exhibition would not be possible without her hard work," Aldridge said.

Espensen said this program is in line with who she is. Despite having the creative bug most of her life, she had no formal training but rather learned through exploration and discovery. She taught art at My City Youth, a nonprofit in Hemet, for about eight years, starting as a volunteer, before the opportunity arose at EXCEED.

"My goal in working with adults is to unleash joy and play," she said. "Whether it is a closed project or an open-ended project, when I let go of what I want to see, I'm delighted with what I end up with. The main thing is to let them create whatever they want; they are the creators."

Program participant Nicole Yoder wanted her art to bring happiness to the viewers and she thought everyone would go forward and be happy and positive after their visit to the show. "I've been involved with art since I was a kid," she said. "I was the creative one, and a fashionista."



Guests at the Art Show presented by EXCEED at the Hemet Public Library are treated to a wide variety of styles, processes and enthusiastic artists sharing their creativity. Valley News/Diane A. Rhodes photo



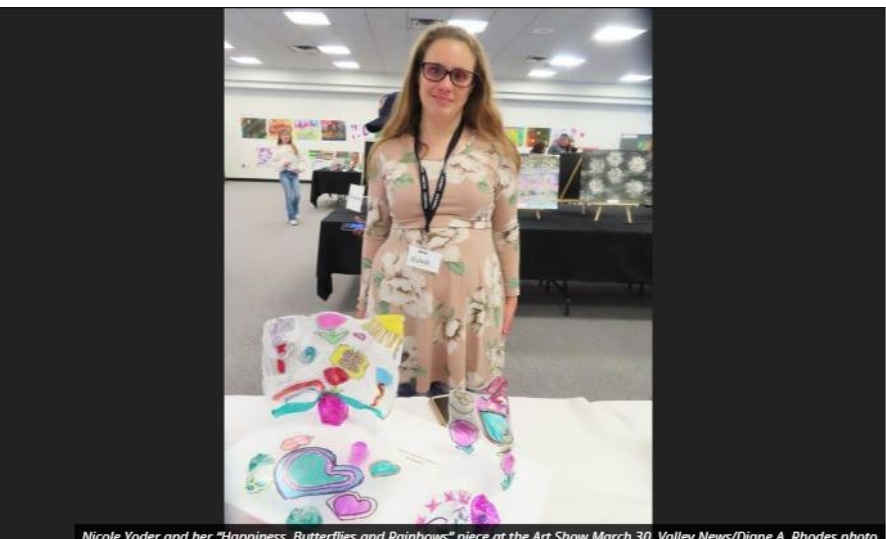
Heather Storch is a featured artist for her contribution to the "Freestyle Mixed Media" Art in the Park session. Valley News/Diane A. Rhodes photo



Featured artist Dean Shrader shares his stencil art piece, on an easel, at the Hemet Public Library. Valley News/Diane A. Rhodes photo



Elaine Morris, left, with art facilitator Nancy Espensen, shows her Dale Chihuly-inspired "Elephants Playing" creation. Valley News/Diane A. Rhodes photo



Nicole Yoder and her "Happiness, Butterflies and Rainbows" piece at the Art Show March 30. Valley News/Diane A. Rhodes photo

Dean Shrader was proud to share his “New York at Night” titled piece from the “Stencils” process, where sponges were used to apply acrylic paint through the stencil. Shrader chose seagulls flying against a cityscape of tall buildings, using green paint to complete his monochromatic silhouette. He said this was his first time doing art and he was surprised to have been chosen as a featured artist.

Gerardo Avellaneda enjoyed the “Batik Inspired by Anna Blatman” process as well as “Dandelions.” Heather Storch made an impression with her “Freestyle Mixed Media” submission, where participants were given a multitude of different mediums to experiment and develop their own personal style and favorites.

“Many of our program participants have had the opportunity to develop skills they didn’t know they had,” Aldridge said. “Many have found a way to express themselves that they perhaps did not have before. Some clients have become more verbally communicative with their group supervisors and peers.”

Group Supervisor Frank Gallegos has been with EXCEED for 34 years and works with program participants inside the classrooms and out in the community. He said they always enjoy talking about the art they are creating.

Lilienthal said he had the opportunity to attend several Art in the Park sessions and found it to be an incredible experience to witness the adults engaged, enthusiastic and eager to work on their respective projects. He said the Art Show was an outstanding testament to the power of creativity and the boundless potential of individuals with disabilities.

“The diverse range of artworks showcased these incredible participants’ immense talent and artistic expression. The event was filled with inspiration, joy and a strong community spirit,” he said. “The dedicated efforts of art facilitator Nancy Espensen, along with the support of EXCEED and the City of Hemet Community Development Block Grant, have made a lasting impact on the lives of many.”

He added that the Art Show was a celebration of artistic achievements and a powerful reminder that everyone has the potential to be creative and expressive, no matter their background or abilities.

“Together, we can continue to break barriers, foster connections and promote the growth of the arts in our beloved city of Hemet,” Lilienthal said. “This phenomenal program, centered around the arts, resonated with my passion for seeing the arts flourish in Hemet.”

Art Show guests were also treated to an array of charcuterie items and other refreshments provided by the evening’s food and beverage sponsor, Soboba Foundation. Tables were set up beyond the art displays at the Hemet Public Library upstairs space rental that was sponsored by the City of Hemet. There, artists gathered with their invited family members and friends to talk about their art.

The Community Development Block Grant funding cycle will cover this program through the end of June with the hopes it will be approved for the 2023-2024 fiscal year. Aldridge said there are no plans to expand the program except maybe to make the Art Show an annual event.

“When you help people open up that creative portal and don’t have rules around it, you get to enjoy the specialness like the day of our Art Show,” Espensen said. “I got to meet quite a few of my artists’ family members and there were many goosebumps moments. Parents were really moved by what their children were able to accomplish.”

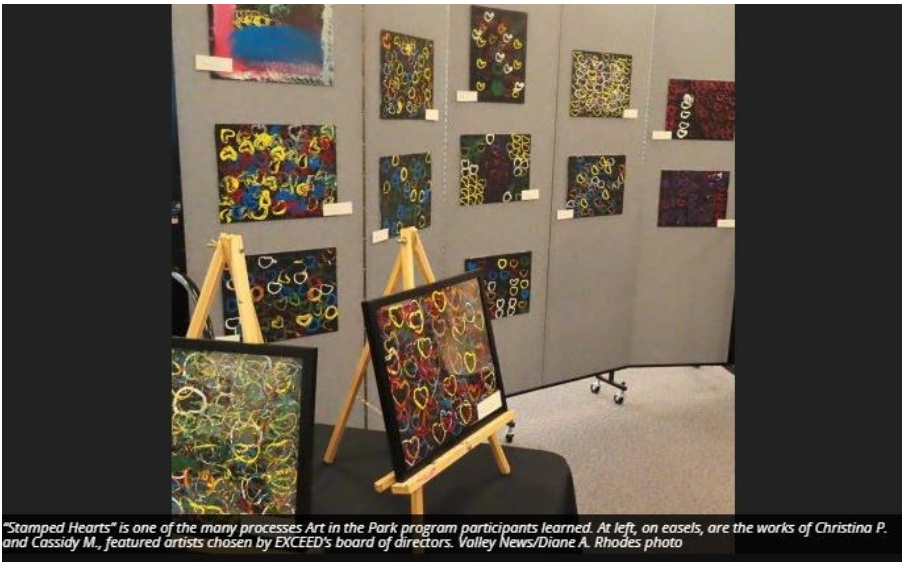
After a hiatus due to the recent heavy rains, Art in the Park sessions resumed on April 11 with a “Spring Cleaning” collage project. Espensen supplied many crafty odds and ends from past projects for the participants to use and each creation was personal and unique, just like the artists themselves.

For more information visit www.weexceed.org.

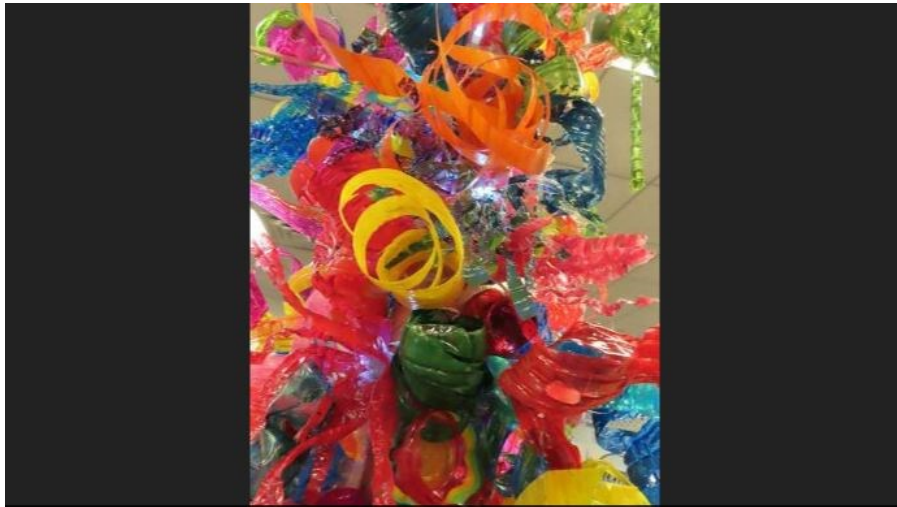
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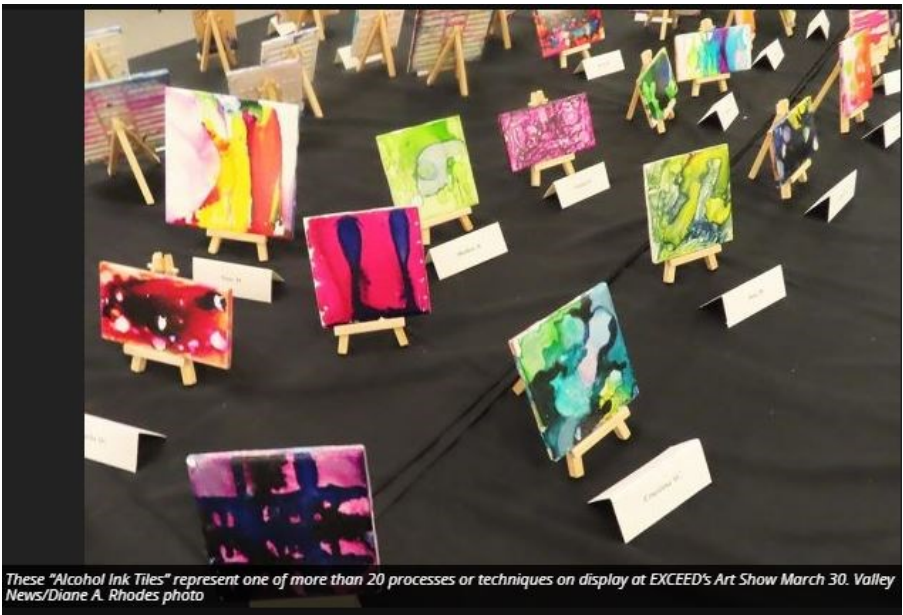
Gerardo Avellaneda shows his creation for the “Batik Inspired by Anna Blatman” Art in the Park session. Valley News/Diane A. Rhodes photo



“Stamped Hearts” is one of the many processes Art in the Park program participants learned. At left, on easels, are the works of Christina P. and Cassidy M., featured artists chosen by EXCEED’s board of directors. Valley News/Diane A. Rhodes photo



One of the Dale Chihuly-inspired chandeliers shows the intricate details created during the collaborative project. Valley News/Diane A. Rhodes photo



These “Alcohol Ink Tiles” represent one of more than 20 processes or techniques on display at EXCEED’s Art Show March 30. Valley News/Diane A. Rhodes photo