

End-of-Year Report

Please answer the following questions:

1. Briefly describe project activities during this report period. (What exactly did you do?)

Improve your Social Life: Social Skills and Having Fun for Tweens and Teens Living with Autism and Other Developmental Disabilities met regularly at the Albert Wisner Public Library, in Warwick, New York. We scheduled sixteen meetings between September, 2017 and June, 2018. Here is a list of project activities that have met since the mid-year report:

Dance (two sessions): The first session was modern dance and movement class. The teacher is a specialist in modern, creative and improvisational dance. The class began with name introductions through a movement game, and warm ups. The instructor then displayed cards with different instructions on them, while reading them aloud. The dancers were instructed to gallop, tiptoe, shake, ice skate, as well as to create their own moves to music. Teen ambassadors (and dance students) helped by demonstrating a movement first. The participants made “shapes” and “melted” them to the floor and could leap or jump over an item placed in the middle of the floor, in any manner they chose. They also did a mirror exercise with a partner.



The second dance session, taught by a local educator, was to introduce and practice popular party dances often seen at weddings and school dances. Dances included the Cupid Shuffle, the Charlie Brown, the Wobble, the Electric Slide, and the Hora. The participants also learned the rules of

etiquette for slow dancing, such as how to ask someone to dance, how to accept or decline an invitation to dance, and where to properly place one’s hands while slow dancing with another person. This session also began with a name introduction and ended with refreshments.

Art Appreciation (two sessions): The first session was an art appreciation presentation followed by the opportunity to create an original art piece. Taught by an experienced art teacher, the session began with a PowerPoint presentation of 10 well-known works of art, the title and the artist’s name. The instructor talked briefly about one aspect of the painting and its relation to emotions. The instructor engaged the participants by asking open ended questions about how they felt about a painting and why. It was





interesting to see that the participants often spoke precisely about a color or a detail in the painting. Artwork presented included Frieda Kahlo, Vincent Van Gogh, Picasso, and Georgia O'Keeffe. After the survey of art, students were free to use a wide variety of materials to create artwork of their own. Pencils, glue, fabric, found objects of different textures, and paint were all used to create original works.

The second session was billed as "Sip and Paint." It featured "Sunflowers" by Vincent Van Gogh. Each participant received a copy of the work, a canvas with the work outlined on it, and the specific colors that matched the original. The instructor spoke about the proper way to hold the brush and brushstrokes. The participants filled in the outline of the work while copying the original. If they chose afterwards, they could then create their own artwork, while chatting with others and taking breaks for refreshments.

Movie and Karaoke: Participants sat on the floor, on chairs or beanbag chairs, or walked around and moved during the animated movie *Sing*. The movie contains popular top 40 hits and the characters frequently break into song. Sometimes our audience couldn't resist and joined in the singing and dancing as well. This was followed by karaoke. Participants chose classic rock and rap songs to sing along to for their audience.



Gift Making: This activity was planned to coincide with Mother's Day and was billed as making gifts for mothers or other important people in their life. Led by a local artist, the students made an array of gifts. They started by painting canvas and letting them dry, and returning to them later to add designs, drawings or collage. There was a huge variety of beads available for stringing bracelets and the instructor taught the participants how measure their string, and how to add a clasp and prevent beads from falling off by using a crimp bead and pliers. The participants also had the option of making a mobile from a variety of materials. Tissue paper, ribbon and tape were available for wrapping the gifts at the end.

Party Planning and Party (two sessions): This session was led by a special education teacher. The "party planners" met and decided on a theme for the party that would end the library series (and coincided with the end of the academic year). After some discussion, they decided on a summer-party theme ("Fun in the Sun"), as well as activities, food, games, and music playlist. The committee made summer-themed decorations such as glass bowls with sand and colorful

rocks, and paper umbrellas in Styrofoam swim noodles. All the party ideas were written on an easel and the participants added to it freely. Song suggestions were added to a separate list, and one of the participants made a Spotify playlist for the party.

The party was held the following week. The participants played musical chairs, had a relay race and played hot beach ball. Card games were available for anyone who needed a quiet space



and activity. The refreshments selected were chips, soda, pizza, juice, water, and Italian ices. The participants did party dances from the dance session, and there was a decorated doorway and props for taking photos. It was an energetic and happening party! There was no better way to end our autism series at the library.

2. Describe the ways in which your program has met its goals since the mid-year report.

As a continuation of the series in the first half, the program contained a series of workshops designed to address different social skills that

are often challenging for tweens and teens with autism, with a goal of helping them move beyond the social skills they currently have and provide them with more age-appropriate skills that will better serve them in school and in the community – and particularly to make them feel more connected to each other, develop skills for personal growth, and to recognize their library as a safe and inviting place. In the second half of the programming series, a core group of regulars developed, and this helped to gel the group to a comfort level where everyone could share ideas, dance more freely, and be a little less hesitant.

3. What barriers did you encounter in the second half of the grant period? How did you deal with them?

We were perplexed by the fluctuation in numbers attending events. All the events were advertised in addition to being listed on the library's webpage. It seemed that creative art events attracted more participants, including those who hadn't attended before. The movie and karaoke attracted a different set of participants. We haven't figured out the formula yet, but remained prepared, flexible, and calm, especially when an unexpected number showed up for one of the art events. Even though registration was suggested (and required for the gift making event), there was no predicting who would show up – but they always did. (Parents of children with autism confessed to the difficulty of planning in advance, a reluctance to register and commit when unforeseen circumstances could waylay the best-laid plans, and not regularly checking the schedule. Flexibility is a necessity with this parent population).

4. What was the most successful aspect of your project? The least successful? Describe why.

The most successful and satisfying aspects of our project is when the teens on the spectrum allowed their imaginations to run and create astonishing and frankly unexpected original works of art. One librarian described the first art appreciation as "controlled chaos." The art teacher brought many materials and tools, and because it was well-organized and there were a lot of adults on hand to assist, the range of freely creative art was unexpected. This said, the contrast with the following week's activity, copying Van Gogh's Sunflowers, was really interesting. There were participants who spent two hours copying every detail and color and trying to get everything right. In the end, every work of the copied art had a different look or feel to it. The importance of art as a creative, therapeutic, and social force became very apparent through our programming and had the broadest appeal. This was true with the creative dance program as well. There were moments where the participants were so absorbed by their movements and the music that creative dance began to happen. That there was no "right or wrong" aspect to the art and dance events, which allowed for full expression and a new self-confidence in one's own abilities.

The least successful aspects of our programming seemed to be when the participants were talked to about a subject versus active participation. Although it was our hope to impart lots of knowledge about photography, and internet-safety, and stress management, the way the information was shared was as important as the message. Hands-on, movement, and outlets for creative expression made these sessions more engaging.

5. If you could do anything differently, what would it be and why?

There were some technical difficulties involving PowerPoint presentations and videos. The library's Wi-Fi in the conference room was occasionally uneven, and left several presenters struggling with the library's system. One librarian suggested that it would be helpful to know in advance what technology the presenters planned to bring (laptops, thumb drives), or that they send their presentations in an electronic file format in advance so that it can be loaded onto the library's equipment.

The library's Teen Ambassadors were always a valued addition to any event. Their busy schedules did not always allow for them to be present; however, when they were, they made a great impression on the participants. Their presence at Game Night, Art Appreciation, Dance events and the party made an impact in that they modeled appropriate behaviors and demonstrated typical natural interactions. In return, the Teen Ambassadors perhaps learned that it is easy to include someone, even in a small and meaningful way (come play Uno with us!) and that fun can be had with anyone, even someone who is non-verbal or someone who flaps.

One aspect for planning next year is going to be looking at other events in the community and providing a complement. For the purposes of this grant and scheduling the library calendar, all the events were planned a year in advance. The second dance session --learning party and social event dances -- happened a week *after* the local Night to Shine Prom, a heavily-attended prom sponsored by a local church for people with special needs. If we had known about the prom in advance, we could have scheduled the dance session for *before* the event. It was unforeseen this year, but in the future, we hope through careful scheduling and planning to increase coordination with our community through our library activities.

6. Is there anything your library has planned to build on or continue the work of this project? Please describe.

The Albert Wisner Public Library is pleased to share with you that due to the success of this program, the library would like to continue it and will commit \$2500 of its budget towards this during the next fiscal year. A committee has already met and discussed activities for the future. We will start once again with our popular Game Night, a historical walking tour of Warwick in autumn, and gift-making for the holidays for our fall programming. For the spring, we will consider the events we have already presented as well as adding some new ones such as nature walks, cooking, creating a cookbook, and a book-themed party. There will be routine efforts to confirm that there are at least two teen ambassadors committed to attending each event. The library's other goal is to further publicize its collection of books and DVDs about autism, and to enhance its information about where to find resources, to the community.

Our Game Night will give us another opportunity to accomplish something special: we would like to poll the participants to come up with a new name for this group (and something

hopefully snappier than Improve Your Social Life: Social Skills and Having Fun for Tweens and Teens living with Autism and Other Developmental Disabilities!). The name chosen by the group, whatever it may be, will reflect the gains that our tweens and teens on the spectrum have made socially, and will always continue to improve, going forward.

7. Please attach photos, videos or anecdotes that convey the impact of your program or service, if available. Do we have permission to use these in promotional materials and on the Libraries and Autism: We're Connected website and the Targeting Autism blog?

One memorable detail was during karaoke event – we had a participant who was new, but whose brother often attended. After the movie, he couldn't wait for the karaoke to begin. He had the lyrics ready on his phone, and it was very clear that he had practiced for this moment. He performed a rap song, and the other kids were completely supportive, attentive, and burst into huge applause at the end. Asked about the song later, he shared that it was one that had a lot of personal meaning for him. In the safe space of the library and the autism social group, he was able to express something private to the group, and they loved and supported him without judgment.

Another charming moment: the dance instructor for the party dances didn't know all the participants' names, although at this point in the series, they all knew each other's names. Using a stuffed animal, each participant had to randomly toss the animal to someone else in the circle and say that person's name. After one stuffed animal came another...and another. They were able to throw up to a dozen stuffed animals at each other in the same exact order and keep the chain of stuffed animals going. The librarians in the circle couldn't keep up – it was an excellent ice breaker and ton of fun.

Most of our instructors were local or known to someone locally. This program gave our library the opportunity to tap into an incredible wealth of creativity found uniquely in our own town, and build lasting connections between the library and the artistic community of Warwick. We were constantly surprised by the depth of their presentations and offerings to our social group. Another outcome of this project was that some the parents were able to separate from their child and socialize separately. Some dashed around the library with newfound freedom, and others caught up about school, resources, and upcoming events. Parents of children on the spectrum were given a huge gift by this program – their teens had activities of their own to attend, and the comfort that came from meeting in the same space in the library made everyone feel secure about these steps towards independence. Our local library became that place for tweens and teens of the spectrum.

One more detail to share: as mentioned above about the end-of-the-year party, there was a quiet space for anyone who needed a break from the party. There were no takers. Not that there is anything wrong with needing a quiet activity; but these kids were so looking forward to the party that they helped plan, and loved dancing and playing games together, and socializing, that no one required a break. In some ways, it should not have been such a surprise: like any

teens, they finally had an outlet and some social tools to help them out at a party and could totally partake and enjoy the fun. It has been a blast!

We will always remain grateful for this grant and the opportunities it has given us this past year and going forward. Thank you for this opportunity to share our program and its developments with you. We hope that the information provided shows that our library is a place for everyone in the community, and perhaps provides helpful information for other libraries who wish to reach out to the autism tween and teen populations in their own communities. Please know that you may use the attached photos on your above-mentioned website and blog. If you have any questions or require any further information, please do not hesitate to contact us. Thank you.