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Guest Post: From Mudroom to Magic

By Emily Mancini, Magic Paintbrush Project

The Magic Paintbrush Project provides facilitated workshops, which complement special needs interventions for individuals, families, and professionals facing the challenges of a special needs diagnosis. The Project's workshops reinforce rehabilitative interventions, addressing the participant's needs while engaging their caregiver. Using art supplies, trained staff, and specially designed activities, participants engage in an atmosphere that is fun, accepting and relaxing.



"I was so excited to bring two beautiful daughters into this world, and as so many mothers do, I looked forward to watching them spin and dance and be joyful. And then we got their cerebral palsy diagnosis, putting limitations on what my little girls would be able to experience in their lifetime, [and] even though it was mild, it didn't change the heartache," explains Jen. And at the point where so many parents fall apart, Jen decided to fight - not to take the road less traveled, but rather create a brand new path of her own.

In 2003, Jennifer began searching for creative ways to encourage motion and stretching, outside of the physically and emotionally taxing therapy sessions. In the mudroom of her home, she began to experiment with simple art supplies, and realized her girls were benefiting not only from the motion of the activity, but also from the experience of creating colorful pieces of art that they were proud of, and wanted to create over and over again. The paintings and creations were great visual memories of the Ability in Disability and allowed Jennifer to be involved in the process while maintaining her role as their mom.

Jennifer tapped into a previously unknown care giving requirement; the need to engage the whole family in the rehabilitative process. Soon, service agencies and families with special needs began to recognize the value, and were requesting sessions and training. Jennifer has worked with several UCP affiliates in upstate New York, and the impact of her work can be seen and felt throughout all of Central New York.

The overwhelming response has led to more than 600 workshops with special needs families. Jennifer has provided over 8,000 hours of volunteer service to this effort, coordinated over 6,000 hours of volunteer service in her community, and has impacted 8,5000 lives and counting.

The Magic Paintbrush Project offers facilitated workshops to special needs families and their caregivers using paint and other creative mediums. By actively engaging each person in the process, the activity complements the community services and interventions families are already receiving. Furthermore, this effort enhances the individual and caregiver's confidence and enthusiasm, positively affecting the care given to the special needs individual.

The Magic Paintbrush Project has the distinction of being a safe place to explore and celebrate ability. While assisting each family member to recognize their potential, Jennifer has also helped the larger community see possibility where they once saw disability. "It's everything you never expected to happen, and everything you wished for," says Jennifer.

Today, Jennifer not only gets to watch her daughters dance, twirl and experience pure joy and acceptance but she has the opportunity to experience the joy of other parents as they watch their children live out their dreams.