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# PROMISING PRACTICES



## Creative arts program plugs artists into the Twin Cities' vibrant fine arts community

[Midwest Special Services, Inc.](#) (MSS), provides individualized programs and supports to adults with disabilities in Minnesota. In 1999, MSS started the Creative Arts Program to explore a different avenue of programming for adults with significant physical and intellectual disabilities. Participation in the fine arts quickly proved to be a meaningful and engaging activity for both participants and staff members involved with the program, which encourages creativity, growth, and “out-of-the-box” thinking. Today, the art program facilitates exposure to a wide range of activities, including pottery making, audio recording, performance art, photography, screen printing, and textile art.

The Creative Arts Program puts control of the creative process fully on the artist. MSS' art facilitators offer an individualized approach for each artist that includes adaptive tools, techniques, communication, and choice making. One example of an individualized technique is the use of visual samples to allow someone who cannot use his or her voice to choose colors, textures, and techniques by eye gazing or reaching out.

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### About the ECS Promising Practices newsletter series

An organization receiving exemplary recognition in its CARF survey report stands out because of its professional and strategic response to a service or business need. CARF presents these ECS Promising Practices articles to encourage dialogue among service providers and to offer examples of creative solutions for improving service quality.

Find current and past issues of ECS Promising Practices at:

[www.carf.org/ecspromisingpractices](http://www.carf.org/ecspromisingpractices)

Issues are categorized by topic: Business Practices, Community Services, and Employment Services.



*Ceramic bowl with marbled red and white earthenware*

For many who participate, it is their first real experience with creating fine art, and they are thrilled for a new avenue of self-expression. One artist, who cannot fully control her arms, glazed pottery by utilizing a headband paintbrush. She applied the glaze stroke by stroke during hours of concentration and focus. Through the use of adaptive techniques and solutions like this, the program is able to support artists at all levels of accomplishment.



*Mixed media*

The Twin Cities' art, music, and theater community is very active and diverse. As MSS' Creative Arts Program has grown, the emphasis naturally has turned to providing platforms for artists with disabilities to exhibit and sell their work in the community, at art festivals, at events, or through MSS' online art gallery. Past exhibits have included shows at Augsburg College, University of St. Thomas, Federal Reserve Bank, and Perpich Center for Arts Education. In addition, MSS is a member of a community-based art gallery in downtown St. Paul called The Show, where MSS artists can display and sell



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their art. MSS is proud to have one of its artists serving on The Show's board of directors. MSS also offers work to artists by silk screening T-shirts and bags for outside organizations.



*Black and white photo created by cutting up a negative and taping it back together. Created in a collaboration of Creative Art Program artists.*

The first factor of the Creative Arts Program's success has been not limiting the thinking around what is possible. The program staff has been proactive in taking advantage of every available opportunity to participate in community-based arts and culture activities. For example, the program has been awarded a grant by the Minnesota State Arts Board to create a feature-length film and behind-the-scenes documentary. In conjunction with this grant, the Metropolitan Regional Arts Council awarded MSS a grant for participants to create the musical score for the film by collaborating with local composer, Troy Strand. The Minnesota State Arts Board has also funded projects for MSS to work with Upstream Arts and Kairos Alive! to engage clients in theater, poetry, song, dance, storytelling, and visual art. Other community partners include The Arts of LifeSM in Chicago, The Cedar Cultural Center, VSA Minnesota, composer Chris Coyle, CLIMB Theatre, and Mann Lake Ltd.

The second factor to the program's success is in MSS' hiring practices. In addition to a candidate's potential to provide direct care services, MSS looks for people who are passionate about their other interests and are willing to share that passion with clients. Then, most importantly, staff members are provided with the means and opportunity to bring their passion to work. Ideas on theater arts, videography, gardening, music, painting, and cooking are all being explored and shared on a daily basis.

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The Creative Arts Program has received exemplary commendations in two consecutive [CARE](#) surveys— in 2011

and 2014. The most recent recognition stated, in part, “MSS’ Creative Arts Program is exemplary. This program assists adults with disabilities to reach their personal goals and full potential by identifying barriers to creative expression and mitigating them through an individualized, facilitated approach.”

For more information on MSS’ Creative Arts Program, contact Lauren Hughes, MSS’ creative arts development specialist, at [lhughes@mwsservices.org](mailto:lhughes@mwsservices.org).

[www.carf.org](http://www.carf.org)