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Unity through Differences

Non-profit celebrates art and mental diversity

BY MINDY COOPER
 THE PORTLAND OBSERVER

As an alternative to the current model of support for people labeled with disabilities, one local non-profit is determined to build a collaborative community where everyone's voice is valued.

Project Grow, a non-profit organization located in north Portland, was founded on the principle that adults with developmental disabilities deserve the right to create and share meaningful art, establish a closer relationship with their food source, and lead a healthier and positive life.

As a progressive program for adults of all mental diversities, Project Grow believes everyone is both a student and a teacher, and provides space and opportunities for everyone to grow together as a community.

"It is really about creating and advocating for everyone's right to be celebrated," said Emese Ilyes, a coordinator in the organization and a part of the Project Grow community since its conception over two-years ago. "Anyone can be a part of the movement."

Inside the group's artist studio on a recent visit, members of the community could be seen painting with water colors, weaving blankets and making mobiles out of found objects.

With fiber goats in the yard outside and urban gardens surrounding and scattered throughout the neighborhood, each individual is given the opportunity to find their voice as artists and farmers within an environment where everyone is valued for being themselves.



PHOTOS BY MINDY COOPER/THE PORTLAND OBSERVER

Project Grow coordinator Emese Ilyes (left) and Patsy, a member of the community also known as "the boss," have fun inside the Project Grow artist studio, where Patsy sits at her desk and enjoys learning about filing and office work.



Inside Project Grow's artist studio on North Williams Avenue, community member Zach said he has fun while painting watercolors and working on the non-profit's urban garden. He said he likes his job better than his previous work, which entailed sorting hangers and laundry. "It's a nice place to be," he said.

Port City Developmental Center, which has provided employment, job training and support services for people with developmental disabilities in the Portland metro community since 1978, provides the resources that help keep the program a reality, said Ilyes.

She said, however, Project Grow emerged as an alternative model to increase opportunities for individuals to be active agents within their own lives.

The old model was called vocational rehabilitation facilities or shelter workshops, she said, which came about in the 1960s when large institutions were the norm.

After people realized the segregate tendencies of asylums, she said group homes and vocational rehabilitation sites like Port City began to emerge, which allowed individuals labeled with disabilities

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