

SPIRIT: Communicates through iPad, facial expressions

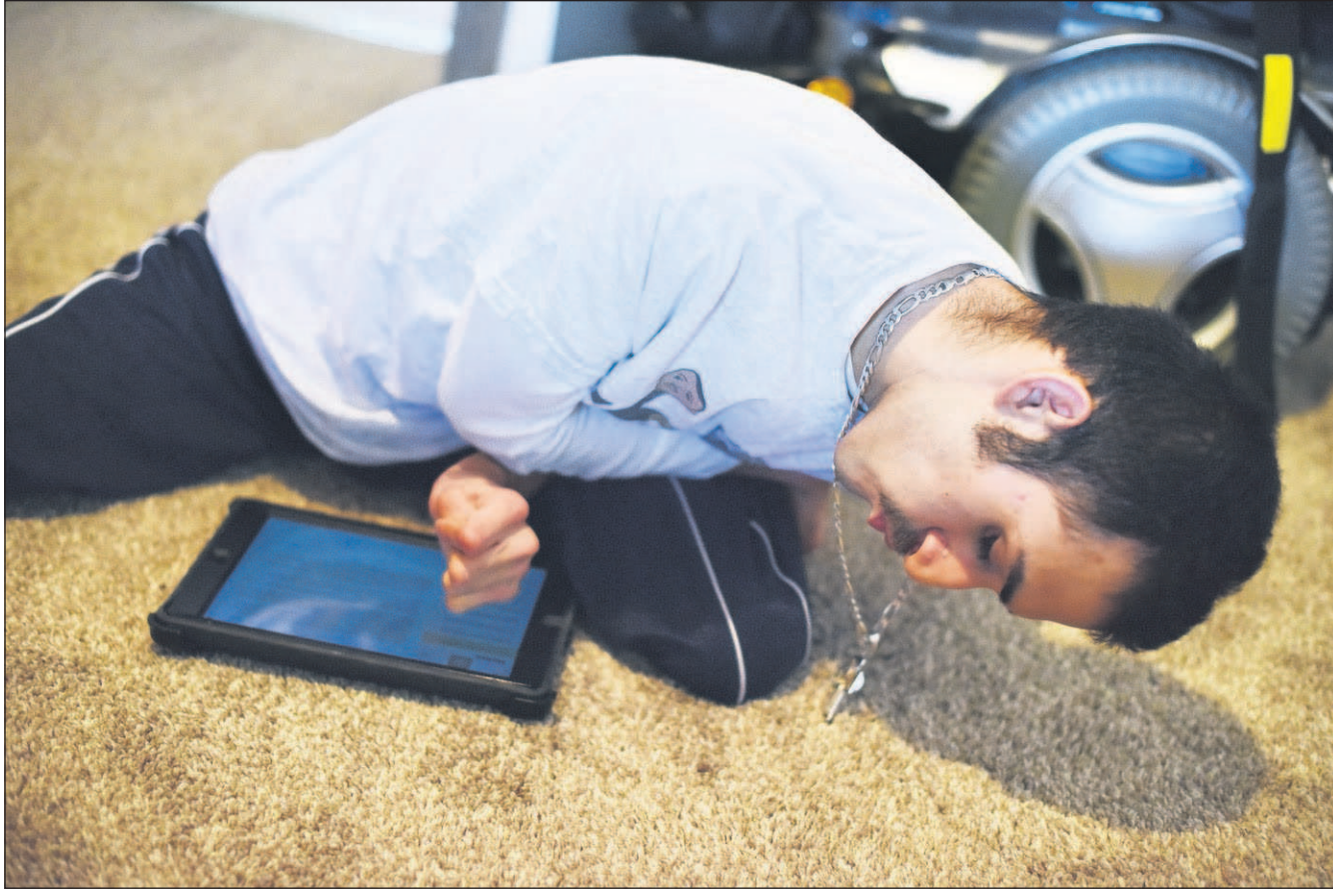
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He recently launched a business called The Wheelman Designs, selling T-shirts of his own design through the e-commerce website Etsy. His latest design consists of a likeness of himself with a mohawk haircut and fluorescent yellow high tops sitting in a wheelchair, raising his arms in triumph. Beside him are the words "Rockstar" and "The Wheelman" in bold red. Another shirt is entitled Bling Wheelman, referring to Guardado's love of bling, especially an oversized sparkly cross he wears most days. The shirts, in an array of sizes, cost \$20.

So far, he has sold almost 60 of them, and recently ordered A.J.'s Printed Apparel in Hermiston to make 50 more. He hopes to earn enough to purchase a wheelchair accessible van.

"I created this line of designs with disABLED people in mind," writes the artist on his website, "I work on an iPad creating designs with my right pinky. While I'm physically dependent on others, I am fiercely independent at heart."

Guardado communicates with nods, smiles, eye rolls, head shakes, exuberant exclamations and the help of his ever-present iPad. With the pad, he painstakingly guides an uncooperative knuckle across the glass, touching letters, words, pictures and phrases that are vocalized through a speaker. His body bucks. Imagine trying to use an iPad while riding the Tilt-A-Whirl or a mechanical bull and you'll have a sense of the focus Guardado must have to do things other people do without a second thought. To get the right leverage he must sit on the floor, brace himself on his left leg and lean over the screen, concentrating like someone trying to thread a needle while running stairs.



Jose Adan Guardado must contort himself over his iPad using his knuckle to control the touch screen. Guardado has cerebral palsy that causes muscle contractions that make it difficult for him to control his body. Staff photo by E.J. Harris

Guardado's buddy, Laurie Ellis, helps smooth the rough edges for him.

Ellis first met Guardado when he was a 6-year-old at A.C. Houghton Elementary School where she worked as special education assistant. They quickly formed a bond. Since there wasn't much in the way of communication devices or software then, she learned to read his expressions and movements.

"In the beginning, it was like ESP," she said.

She soon realized the little boy was crazy smart.

"He's always been really bright," Ellis said. "And he's got an indomitable spirit."

Eventually, technology improved their communication and she glimpsed even more of Adan's inner world.

Guardado is starting to prove himself to others as well. He did computer repair, designed 3D videos and designed logos for organizations such as the

Arlington Public Library.

He and Ellis, who now substitute teaches in the Morrow County School District, stayed close through the years. In his teens, Ellis even picked up Guardado's homecoming date for him.

During his time at Irrigon Junior/Senior High School, he weathered two huge challenges.

The first came when his rickety power wheelchair started to stutter and stop at inopportune times. He started a GoFundMe account to buy a high-tech \$18,000 motorized chair that would allow him to venture out

into the community and to communicate despite his dysfunctional body. His teachers, fellow students and community members came through with the cash.

Another challenge came when he got an order from the United States Immigration and Naturalization Service saying he would be deported back to El Salvador where many who knew him worried he would die. With efforts of Sen. Ron Wyden and Rep. Greg Walden, the order was eventually withdrawn.

He recently obtained his official U.S. citizenship,

but isn't eligible for health insurance for a while. He encourages others to ask Congress to remove the waiting period.

"I need a therapist because my body is hurting," Guardado wrote. "I need to wait two years before I get insurance."

Despite his worries, Ellis said he doesn't dwell on his problems.

"He's always been an inspiration to me," Ellis said. "He's always has a smile on his face."

On Wednesday, Ellis sat in Guardado's bedroom in his grandparent's home and



Illustration by Jose Adan Guardado The first The Bling Wheelman T-shirt design.

chatted with him about the business. Ellis contributes by packaging the orders (though Guardado prints the labels) and serving as a sounding board. She's an artist too with her own Etsy site.

This summer, they will attend two festivals together — Umatilla Landing Days and the Watermelon Festival in Hermiston — where they will set up booths next to each other and sell T-shirts.

They are obviously close. When Ellis worked at Tonia's House, a residence for runaway and homeless girls in Pendleton, she sometimes brought girls to meet Guardado.

"They'd hang out with him a little bit," Ellis said. "They saw how hard he was working and were able to see outside themselves."

Lately, she's noticed Guardado has gotten a little restless.

"As he's gotten older, he seems more frustrated," she said. "He wants to get out and be independent."

With the proceeds of his shirt sales, he may finally realize that dream.

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PLEA: 'This has left us with frustration and completely destroyed'

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"I plead guilty, your honor," he said.

Eight members of Rodriguez's family came to the proceeding, and his sister, Susanna Aguero, addressed the court. She said words fail to describe their pain.

"This has left us with frustration and completely destroyed," she said. "We trusted Conor so much — we gave him a home and food when he had nowhere to go."

Aguero called Dayton a coward for not being in court to face her family and said he had no reason to kill her brother. Dayton may be going to prison for a long time, she said, but "we are waiting for an absolution that will never come."

Family members wept while Aguero delivered the statement. She also called for justice and said law enforcement from the beginning of the case shut doors in the family's face.

The Umatilla County Sheriff's Office initially investigated the case and declared there was no foul play. But in August the sheriff's office decided Rodriguez's death was a homicide and blamed Dayton for the crime. The sheriff's office has yet to explain what led to those charges.

District Attorney Dan Primus and his chief deputy, Jaclyn Jenkins, asked the family if anyone else wanted to speak. Members through a Spanish language interpreter said they have much to say but too much emotion to say anything.

Primus relayed that message to the judge and more. He said the family is tight knit, and families who lose a loved one to crime can

struggle with why it happened, which his office often cannot answer. He said Rodriguez's mother wants Dayton to be forthright with who else could be involved in the murder.

Dayton, too, spoke. He apologized to the family and said life in prison was a just sentence. But he gave no answers.

"I can't properly describe why I did what I did," he said. "That's all I can say — I'm sorry, guys."

Brauer called Rodriguez's death a tragedy.

"There can be no explanation of conduct like this," the judge said. "This is without reason. No excuse for it."

Brauer said he would deliver the justice the law and plea deal allows.

"You've done the crime," Brauer said. "Now you will do the time — a life sentence with a 25-year minimum."

Brauer gave Dayton a year for the corpse abuse, which will run at the same time as the murder sentence.

Fisher after the hearing explained the original plea deal required Dayton to "debrief" the state on what happened, but prosecutors were "beyond adamant" that Dayton did not comply with the terms. The defense could have fought to preserve the manslaughter deal, Fisher said, but there was little chance of prevailing. Fisher said Dayton opted to forgo that effort and take the murder rap.

Primus afterward said the state was pleased with the outcome. He said there are questions concerning the circumstances of the crimes and the events that followed, and as a father himself, he can relate to Rodriguez's mother wanting to have all the answers possible.



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