

Building Pathways FOR THE FUTURE

A groundbreaking training program from Digital Arts for Autism offers a clear path forward for arts-minded young adults with autism spectrum disorder. By Bill Donahue



In 2012, the husband-and-wife team of Todd and Gladys West took a gamble on a fledgling enterprise called Elite Animation Academy. They envisioned a vibrant design studio with a noble mission: to develop young minds through the art of animation.

Elite Animation Academy has since grown to include an expansive lineup of summer camps, hands-on courses and virtual opportunities through which students acquire vital skills, stoke their passion for the graphic arts, and develop eye-grabbing portfolios as they pursue a future in a field they adore. The academy has also expanded to serve students of all ages, backgrounds and capabilities, including those with autism spectrum disorder.

On January 20, the Wests will take a bold step forward with the launch of a new training program under Digital Arts for Autism. From January to December, students will learn the fundamentals of animation through a suite of Adobe software programs—namely, Illustrator, Photoshop, InDesign, and Animate, as well as WordPress. A team of skilled instructors who have built successful careers as graphic artists will lead the training classes, all of which will have six students or fewer to enable individualized attention.

"There are students out there right now who may be very frustrated, who may feel lost, and I believe our program can greatly help them," says Gladys West, the executive director of Digital Arts for Autism. "We want them to have the full benefit of our teachers' experience. That's why we intentionally keep our class sizes small. We want to move at their pace and make sure they feel confident in what they are learning."

Students who complete the training program will receive a certificate of completion in graphic design. Although future employment cannot be guaranteed, the program is designed to train students for specialized jobs with printers, publishing companies and other employers in the digital-media field.

"Our core student is a high-functioning adult, age 18 to 22 years old, who has a passion for art and animation," adds Todd West, the program's director. "We're looking for kids who are highly focused on learning the skill set, and who may have a dream of working in this business."

Digital Arts for Autism is currently accepting new students for the training program. Each student must be able to function independently in a structured classroom setting; have an interest in animation or digital media; and successfully manage his or her emotional behavior. The annual cost is \$10,500 per year, which can be managed through monthly or quarterly payment plans.

As the program evolves, the Wests will rely on the expertise of Vicky Westra and other forward-thinking professionals serving on the Digital Arts

for Autism board of directors. As the founder of the Tampa-based nonprofit Autism Shifts, Westra has helped communities work together to "re-imagine a new world for autism." Her perspective will be invaluable as the Wests expand their network of prospective employers looking to benefit from a largely untapped work force.

"We're seeing more companies that are interested in hiring and training individuals who are on the [autism] spectrum," says Gladys West. "These individuals tend to be very focused, honest, punctual and reliable, and they also have extreme attention to detail. They have the potential to be phenomenal employees."

Since opening its doors with a single student, Elite Animation Academy has experienced remarkable growth. Its two Central Florida campuses (Orlando and Tampa) serve more than 300 year-round students and offer more than 40 summer camps. Students of all ages and capabilities, from children to adults, from the novice to the advanced, now benefit from the school's specialized programming.

"Some of our students have gone on to CalArts, Ringling College of Art and Design, and Savannah College of Art and Design—some of best art schools in the country," says Todd West. "Many of them started by attending a summer camp, and from there they took course after course to develop the interests and skills they needed to do well. We love having those kinds of success stories."

He expects to have more student successes to discuss in the near future—particularly those that involve young adults on the autism spectrum who have realized dreams they once thought impossible.

"In the next 10 years, an estimated 500,000 children with autism will enter adulthood and join the working world," he says. "Studies show that 90 percent of high-functioning autistic adults are either underemployed or unemployed. We're trying to change that."



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