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Omoro "Moe" Ralls' artwork has been selected to be displayed at the Westshore Alliance Expose Banner Exhibition.

From confines of autism, artist shines

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Andrea Lypka / MyFoxTampaBay.com

TAMPA - Omoro Ralls is 32 years old, has been diagnosed with autism and doesn't communicate with others easily -- sometimes not even speaking.

But "Moe," as he is known to his family and friends, is one of the most successful artists at the MacDonald Training Center in Tampa, where they work with people with disabilities in the Tampa Bay area.

When Moe came to the center, he was classified "with most profound challenges," said Rita Hattab, Community Relations Coordinator at the center.

But now, people get into bidding wars over his artwork.

His story is about transformation, the kind that art can bring, and the kind that the MacDonald Center tries to bring to the people who go there.

Moe Ralls first came to the MacDonald Center in 1999.

"It was not Ralls who had a problem. We had a problem,"

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Hattab said. "He is brilliant, but because of his behavioral problems, we were classifying him incorrect. We are as guilty as the rest of the world."

But, they soon found out that Moe is a real Renaissance man, easily operating two computers at the same time, often turning out digital art while searching out information on the web.

When the Fine Art Studio opened at the center in 2005, Moe's life changed. At the beginning, he copied other famous paintings.

"And he did that surprisingly well," said Hattab.

He is now a successful artist, has developed his own style, and gained the respect of others.

Moe's current art instructor, Jan Radovan, has been working with Moe for a year. Radovan guides Moe to create quality work.

"He is able to almost accurately copy any drawing, but he also interprets it in his own vision," Radovan said. "Moe sees a lot of pictures and he likes to reference them. He can work on his own."

For participants like Moe, art becomes a form of therapy and expression for some who can't write or speak.

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Teachers at the Center work to give them a sense of dignity, and help them become a productive part of society. For example, those who want a job can earn a living assembling devices for SunPass.

But in the art class in Tampa, each artist gets brushes and colors to work with. They all talk about their painting projects with the instructor. Some just stop by to say hello and look at the artwork on display.

[>> Click here to see a photo gallery of art and artists and the MacDonald Center.](#)

"For each individual, you have to personalize your teaching, because all the artists are different from each other," Radovan said. "Some have talents and some need to develop their talents. I believe that everyone is an artist, and everyone has their own art."

Besides the art of teaching, the instructor establishes individual rapport and mutual respect with all the artists.

"Everyday is different. I give these artists something, but I also receive in return," Radovan said. "They are very sincere with their praises to me. Fieldtrips to galleries are a big deal to them. When we return, they won't stop thanking me."

Radovan says that art does not necessarily have to be beautiful, but it should transform people.

Moe is an example of someone whose life was transformed by art.

"Moe was always an artist, but he was never given an opportunity to express himself," said Hattab.

Now Moe expresses himself with paintings. His most recent work is about Tampa's skyline. He carefully and meticulously paints the windows on the towers. And he colors the sky blue.

He is now a successful artist in every sense of the word. He has developed his own style, gained the respect of others, and his work even sparked a bidding war at a recent fundraising event.

"This painting was not a pity purchase," said his former instructor, Rita Hattab, showing a copy of a vase with flowers that Moe painted. "Those people really wanted his painting; they chose it on its merit. We are proud of him," she said.

And for the second time, Moe's artwork has been selected from 200 entries to be included in the Westshore Alliance Expose Banner Exhibition. Moe created "Tampa Palms," a six-foot painting that was selected to be a part of the exhibition, which is currently on display at the Tampa International Airport. It can also be seen along Boy Scout Boulevard, and in June, it will move to Westshore Mall in Tampa.

Over time, Moe has proven that he measures up with other artists, and wins. But more importantly, he has shown how art can change someone's life – something even Moe's own mother witnessed when she came to the gallery, according to Rita Hattab.

"I saw that she staggered when she saw his work," she said. "I saw her face change, her comportment change. My son - the artist - versus my son - the person with a disability."

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