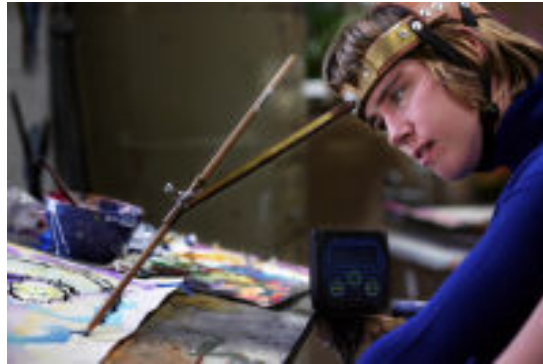


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Graduating with art degree unlikely feat for disabled student

By DEBORAH ZIFF



Anastasia Wilson sits in a wheelchair in a brightly lit art studio on the University of Wisconsin-Whitewater campus, her feet resting limply in laceless, Nike shoes. Her left hand is in her lap; her right is straight at her side, with a clenched fist.

Born with cerebral palsy, she can't grasp a paintbrush.

Instead, she paints with a wooden wand, strapped to the center of her forehead like a unicorn's horn, swishing black acrylic paint back and forth on the canvas.

"Every move takes a degree of effort," said Max White, one of Wilson's professors. "For other students to see that...that's a striking example. Most of us, we don't have to struggle to pick up a brush."

Her dad, Rex Wilson, first made her an unusual headset for drawing when she was six and grasping at a crayon.

Now, at age 26, Wilson is graduating from UW-Whitewater with an art degree, perhaps an unlikely feat for someone who has little control over her muscles.



Craig Schreiner -- State Journal

UW-Whitewater associate art professor Greg Porcaro puts together an abstract self-portrait that Anastasia "Stasia" Wilson painted on panels. Wilson, who has cerebral palsy, is graduating Saturday with a degree in art. She's also getting a minor in English

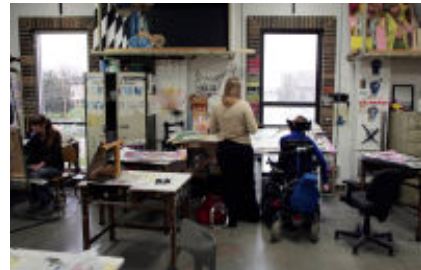
Struggles with dyslexia

An aide — a fellow student — sits by the canvas to apply the paint where Wilson wants it for a self-portrait.

Usually, Wilson uses a computer to communicate. But it gets in the way when she works, so she removes the machine from its perch in front of her.

That means she needs to point with the wand and hope the aide, Melissa Adamski, understands what she wants.

"Do you want it flipped over?" Adamski asks.



Wilson nods yes vigorously and grunts in affirmation, her blue-gray eyes bright.

College graduation was not always certain for Wilson.

As a high school student in Oconomowoc she struggled with dyslexia and did poorly on tests.

And although a middle school art teacher had gone out of her way to encourage Wilson's interest in art, her high school art teachers were less helpful and she was taken out of mainstream classes, said Wilson's mother, Laura Graham.

In her senior year, she decided to take some college courses online and study for the ACT college entrance exam.

"I wanted to prove that I was intelligent and a person with physical and learning disabilities could be successful in school," Wilson said through her computer, which spits out her words in a robotic voice.

Answering questions more complicated than 'yes' or 'no' can take a long time. Wilson uses a communication device called a Pathfinder that she controls with a light blue dot on her forehead. The dot reflects an infrared light at the Pathfinder's keyboard.

The computer guesses what word she wants to use, although sometimes it misunderstands her.

That happened when a friend, passing her in the hallway, asked her the time of a party. "Fifth," she said through the computer.

Wilson shook her head and laughed.

"Five," she corrected.

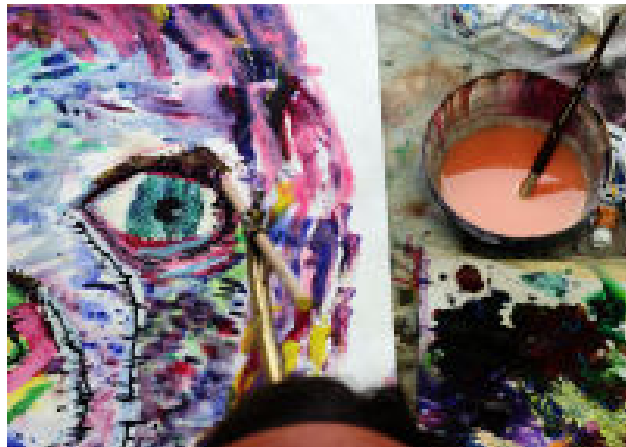
Wilson said she has learned to be very patient. She laughs when others might grow frustrated. For an interview with a reporter, she asked for questions in advance so that she could prepare a response.

"Sometimes I wish I could talk faster, especially when I'm excited or frustrated," she said. "However, it is second nature to me."

Expressing emotion through art

Because communication can be difficult, art is a way for Wilson to express emotion and feeling.

"The non-verbal part of her disability is really a driving force in being an artist," said Graham, her mother. "She can express herself more clearly."



Graham moved to Whitewater to be close to Wilson. Her dad, a mechanical engineer, still lives in Oconomowoc. Graham said she is careful not to hover or drop by her daughter's dorm room unexpectedly.

But as a reminder, one of Wilson's back-up phrases on her wheelchair, directed at her mother, reads: "I need some space."

Graham is there for emergencies, if, for instance, Wilson's chair shorts out in the rain. She can also drop by at 3 a.m. if Wilson is having health problems. Wilson needs stomach surgery because of her cerebral palsy, but has decided to wait until she graduates to have it.

It took Wilson seven years to complete her studies at UW-Whitewater.

For more than 30 years, the school has had a select mission from the University of Wisconsin System to provide supportive services and programs for people with disabilities.

Most of the professors at UW-Whitewater have gone out their way to help Wilson succeed, Graham said. Art professor Denis Dale won an award this semester for helping Wilson find a digital pen to put in her headset so she could take a course in computer graphics, digital painting and illustrating, and photo editing.

Dale said she regularly stayed after class to get comfortable with the new technology.

"She is an amazing person," he said. "Creative and enthusiastic and tough."

He's also helping her explore job options, though Wilson said she wants to take a year off after graduating.

In order to graduate with an art degree, students must have at least one piece of work chosen for the senior art show this week by faculty.

Wilson had five pieces chosen.

