

# Finding pathways to personal expression

Studio 84 gives artists positive outlet for their work

By LYNN GREENE  
SENIOR EDITOR

WHITEWATER — It's only fitting that the first exhibit at Studio 84 in Whitewater should be Anastasia Wilson's work. Wilson, born with cerebral palsy, paints using a brush attached to a headset. Every stroke of the brush requires a corresponding head movement.

The studio, a nonprofit art center that opened in July, has a creative focus on the abilities expressed through the arts. It was founded on the premise that artists like Wilson deserve a place where they can produce art and present their work.

Founders Katherine Fincutter and daughter Deborah Blackwell hope that the studio will provide positive experiences in the visual arts, theater, dance and music for the artist and their community.

The founders are recent graduates of the University of Wisconsin-Whitewater's art studio program. Fincutter graduated in 2003 with an art history minor; Blackwell graduated in May with an arts management minor.

"We've both worked with people with disabilities at various jobs," Fincutter said. "We saw a need for this type of place. There's no place like this for people to come together to create fine art."

Disabilities should not disable or disqualify anyone from participating in his/her artistic community, according to the Studio 84 founders.

Wilson, who is on Studio 84's board of directors, is a case in point. Also a graduate of UW-Whitewater, Wilson paints in oil and acrylic, draws with charcoal and sometimes uses her wheelchair as a mark-making tool.

When she's not communicating through her art, she uses a computerized program called Pathfinder as her voice. A tiny silver dot is stuck to her

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At top is Stasia Wilson's self-portrait, "Window to My Soul." At left is Wilson's painting of a wheelbarrow to honor Edith Thornton, a former University of Wisconsin-Whitewater professor who died in 2007. Above, Wilson works on a painting with the help of Katherine Fincutter, left, and Michelle Stoehr.

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## STUDIO

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forehead. By moving her head, Wilson causes the dot to reflect an infrared light on the Pathfinder's keyboard, which spells out words or spits out pre-programmed phrases.

The computer, although it is sophisticated and comes complete with a word prediction feature, doesn't always deliver the information that Wilson intends to communicate. But Wilson has learned to adjust to these snafus, and bounces in her chair for emphasis when she agrees or disagrees with her proxy voice.

"It does some weird things sometimes," Fincutter said. "Like it says, 'Pick-a-no' instead of 'Picasso,' things like that."

Picasso is one of Wilson's favorite artists, but her very favorite is Vincent Van Gogh. You can see Picasso's influence in some of her portrait paintings, with a nod toward caricature and cubism. And you'll see the influence of Van Gogh's "Starry Night" in Wilson's landscapes.

Rex Wilson made his daughter a worktable, with spots for water, brushes and canvas, so she can work almost independently. He's the one who made her first headset for drawing when she was just 6 years old. But the artist needs assistance to set up the canvas, place paint on the palette and change brushes when needed.

At 26, Wilson graduated with an art major and English minor



Stasia Wilson concentrates on spelling out a sentence with her Pathfinder communication device. A silver dot on her forehead reflects an infrared light on the keyboard. Wilson's artwork hangs on the walls at Studio 84.

after seven years of hard work. One of her pieces chosen for the senior art show earlier this year, "Window to My Soul," is part of her show at Studio 84.

Wilson was at the studio recently and demonstrated her painting technique. Fincutter and Michelle Stoehr, a volunteer for the studio, were there to help get the paper set up and the water and paint ready.

Wilson's mother Laura Graham is happy that her daughter has a place to work.

"The studio has been real good for her and she enjoys volunteering there," Graham said.

Susan Messer, one of Wilson's art professors at UW-W, said

Wilson has a great sense of humor, which in combination with her patience and creativity, enlivens everyone who has an opportunity to work with her.

In her last semester at UW-W, Wilson worked with Messer on independent research in drawing.

"She brought a unique perspective to concepts of self-representation, as well as the representation of the body," Messer said.

Many of the pieces Wilson completed at UW-W are hanging at Studio 84. Wilson's work is a good example of what Fincutter and Blackwell want to encourage at the studio. Their vision

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includes pairing up volunteers with students, offering classes and hosting art showings.

Stoehr, a UW-W student majoring in psychology and art, is volunteering at the studio for the summer.

"I thought it would really work well with my schedule and fit what I'm interested in," Stoehr said.

Said Blackwell, "We have a really unique location here in that the college is here, and we hope to work off that."

Studio 84 needs more volunteers, and will need them once a full schedule of classes begins.

"We can work with the students and their professors, so they can get the experience they want," Blackwell said.

Blackwell and Fincutter took classes with Messer when they were at UW-W, and they've maintained contact with other professors as well. Messer said they are creative, focused students who brought energy and enthusiasm to their work as artists.

Now, they are turning that energy and enthusiasm to their work at the studio. A summer visual-arts program currently is under way through Aug. 28. Classes are available for students, kindergarten age through adult. Anyone interested in expressing himself through art can take classes at the studio. Registration forms can be picked up at the studio or obtained at its Web site.

Studio 84 also has a call for entries in its first juried art

## At A Glance

**What:** Studio 84 Grand Opening

**When:** 7 p.m. to 9 p.m. Sept. 8

**Where:** 121 W. Center St., Whitewater

**Details:** Take a tour of the studio, view current exhibit, enjoy music, food, art and conversation.

**Owners:** Deborah Blackwell and Katherine Fincutter

**Contact:** (262) 812-7560, www.studio84inc.org

show, scheduled Oct. 1-31. October is Art Disability Awareness month, so the exhibit will build off of that. Entries should depict the struggles of living with a disability in today's society, as a personal experience or through knowing, working, living with or caring for someone with a disability.

A disability is defined as either physical, cognitive or mental illness that impairs daily living. That impairment, however, is not allowed to define the artists at Studio 84. Instead, they're celebrated.

Fincutter and Blackwell's perseverance in getting the studio up and running is admirable.

"Their work on Studio 84 is clearly innovative and is drawing on all of their skills — including their perseverance and vision to imagine a space that is unimaginable to many — an accessible, safe studio where creativity is nurtured and facilitated," Messer said. "It's wonderful."