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THE ART OF AWARENESS

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copy editor

As the noisy din of the nearby band room begins to escalate, Kim winces. A table covered with magnificent artwork lies in front of her, yet the persistent beat of the snare drum interferes with her concentration to discuss it.

"I'm fine," she assures.

While an irritating noise can be distracting to anyone, senior Kim Miller has more reason than most to be bothered. Kim has autism, a disorder that, among other things, affects how sensitive one's ears are. When she hears each stroke of the drum, she is hearing a sound 10 times louder than the typical person would.

Overly sensitive hearing is

just one of the many challenges that people with autism must face.

However, many, like Kim, are able to overcome these problems and lead active lives.

In order to celebrate Autism Awareness Month and promote knowledge of the disability, Kim is donating a book to the Roseburg High School library. The book,

entitled *Just This Side of Normal*, is about autism. There is actually a chapter about her in the book, written about the success of mainstream education in her life. She hopes that more students will come to know about autism.

"I want them to know that we are intelligent," Kim stated. She would also like students to become more aware of the language that they use that many others, including herself, take offense to.

"I absolutely hate it - hate it - when people use the word 'retard.' It's a derogatory term," she said. Despite the challenges she has had to overcome, Kim is an internationally renowned artist and is ranked in the top 15 percent of this year's graduating class.

Autism is a disorder that can drastically differ from person to person and affects about one in 165 people in the state of Oregon. It is generally characterized by difficulty with communication and interaction with others. For people with autism,

all five senses (seeing, hearing, touching, tasting, and smelling) experience abnormal degrees of sensitivity, so a sound can be extremely loud or very quiet depending on the affected person. This can be very distracting to someone with autism, causing an inability to tune into truly important information rather than listening to the dog barking down the street.

"It's hard to tolerate classmates who are noisy," Kim said. Another example is the sensitivity of touch and taste; certain textures and tastes of food can be irritating to the tongue and taste buds.

"It's hard for me to eat out because I never know if they will have something I like," she explained.



people affected with autism learn best by copying the behaviors of those around them. In fact, one of the most common way in which they communicate is through repeating phrases they have heard others use. Because of this concept of copying what she sees around her, Kim was enrolled in a typical



kindergarten class.

Rather than focusing on vocational skills, which is something characteristic of some special education programs, she was set on a specialized academic track. Her parents believe that this decision was key in the enormous strides she has made to overcome the challenges of autism.

Kim tries to use the slight advantages having autism can give her. One instance of this is her photographic memory, which is obviously very helpful when it comes to memorizing information for school. However, there is a downside to this gift.

"I remember almost everything that happens to me," she said, "even the bad things. It's like a virtual reality. I relive the bad things over and over again."

Although Kim is an excellent student, she is most recognized for her artwork. People with autism are usually much more receptive to visual information than spoken words, because that is the way that they think. It was apparent early in her life that she had a gift for art, and she has only honed that gift since.

"I used to draw on the walls before I started on paper," she said. "My gift of art is very innate. It just flows out of me."

When she was in elementary school, Kim was recognized in an international art contest for her work. Since then, her artwork has been showcased in many other ways, including several books. Her work is on the cover of the 2005 Autism Society of Oregon calendar, as well as on the month of February. On April 15, Kim was one of several artists with autism from around the state of Oregon to have her work displayed in an art show. The show, put on by the non-profit organization Autism Rocks, took place in Eugene. Kim had three paintings in the show. Her work was also displayed on the website for the show, <www.kindtree.org>.

Kim's involvement in art has helped her to cope with the effects that autism has on her daily life.

"Autistic people are in their own world," she stated. "I feel a lot of peace whenever I'm alone, especially in the arts. It helps me express my feelings and relieves

the stresses of the world."

When Kim creates a piece of art, everything in it is very symbolic and representative of how she feels. "I draw people how they relate to me. It's kind of like a pictorial autobiography," she explained.

Kim also designed the t-shirt for the 2005 Autism Walk-a-Thon in Portland. She came up with a design of a theater mask with lines running throughout it, surrounded by a rose. Each piece of that design has some deeper meaning.

"The mask is representative of autistic people - we are usually expressionless.



The lines [on the mask] are representing a maze - we're supposed to be very mysterious," she said.

These ideas tie in well with people who have autism because it is especially difficult for them to understand the facial expressions



and gestures of others. For example, they may not be able to tell that someone is sad or happy from his or her facial expression. People with autism also have problems with communicating what they are feeling. A person with this disorder does not usually carry on a conversation the way a typical person would, because they have no real desire to partake in the exchange of information that a conversation usually consists of. Instead, it is common for them to memorize bits of trivia that are often shared instead.

Between the art shows and interviews, Kim is just another student at Roseburg High School. She plans to attend Umpqua Community College for a couple of years after graduating this June and then transfer to a university. However, Kim has had to deal with problems that most students do not even think about. High school is a challenging time for many adolescents, from the task of managing schoolwork to forming relationships with others. But the experience is much different and more demanding for people, like Kim, who are also battling a disability.

As the beat of the drums from the band room quickens, Kim refocuses and begins describing another piece of her renowned artwork. Learning to tune out the overpowering sounds around her is just one of the many challenges that Kim faces everyday.

She said, "I am able to cope with it and live in this world."

But by the looks of her accomplishments, she is not just living in this world. She is thriving in it.

Counter-clockwise from bottom: Kim paints a figure in advanced clay class, Kim's self portrait, the cover of the 2005 Autism Society of Oregon calendar, Kim paints the figure's skin tone, Kim poses in front of her artwork for a News Review feature about her involvement in chocolart, Kim curled up with a sketchbook, Kim as a young artist, the mask design for the 2005 Autism Walk-a-thon t-shirt.

PHOTOS BY
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