

Fall 2011

Personal Reflections from ePortfolio: AHRC New York City

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Recommended Citation

Fursova, Olga, "Personal Reflections from ePortfolio: AHRC New York City" (2011). *Community Action Forum: Seidenberg School*. Paper 1.
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Olga Fursova

My Biography

My name is Olga Fursova. I am a junior transfer student at Pace majoring in Psychology. I'm interested in how people work, what makes them tick, how the brain functions and how life experience affects behavior. I hope to go on to med school in order to become a psychiatrist and am currently taking several science courses in preparation. If psychiatry doesn't turn out to be all I hope it is, I'll remain in medicine, possibly neurology. Originally from Tomsk, Russia I have spent most of my life in NYC. Outside of Pace, I work as a Research Associate at a national market research firm. I have volunteered for Seaside Riding Academy which provides therapeutic horse riding lessons to children with physical and mental disabilities, participated in the AIDS and breast cancer walks and routinely foster cats and kittens in my home, socializing them and helping them find good permanent homes. I believe in people and feel that individuals can accomplish all they wish with enough effort and a bit of opportunity.

That's Me



My Friends at AHRC NYC

Me, Kaitlynn and Martin



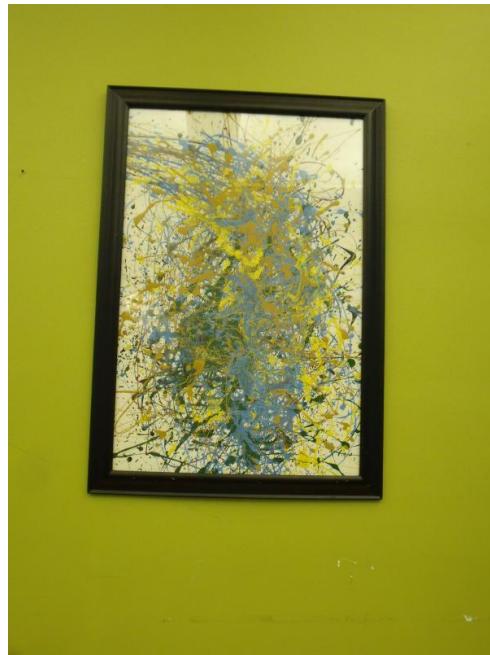
That's me on the left, Kaitlynn in the middle and Martin from AHRC who was kind enough to help us out

Me and Tatiana from AHRC



this is when the class visited an AHRC Adult Day Services center in NYC. Tatiana is one of the teachers at that center.

Artwork by AHRC student



Tatiana explained that artwork by the members of that AHRC daycenter can sell for hundreds of dollars at an exhibition.

My Project at AHRC NYC

The below area outlines the progress Kaitlynn, David and I have been making in the person-centered planning project for David. For the first couple of weeks, we've been learning about David's tastes and interests. We set him up with an email and Facebook accounts so he can communicate with us more directly and took him shopping to the Pace bookstore. It was suggested that my partner Kaitlynn and I divide our responsibilities so we decided that I would focus on David's future educational path whereas Kaitlynn will focus on possible employment opportunities. During last class, I discovered that David enjoys drawing and sketching (that's his work below) so this is something I intend to explore. I researched educational opportunities for him including Kingsborough Community College, Pace University, and The Art Students League of New York. I also explored ways he might pay for college including through grants from The New York State Children and Youth with Special Health Care Needs, The National Autism Association, and The U.S. Department of Education. To help him get to school, I looked at the travel training program offered by AHRC. David had no problem presenting this information during our final and I hope it contributes to his future welfare.

David loves to draw



This is David drawing in a Pace classroom during class.

David's drawing of me



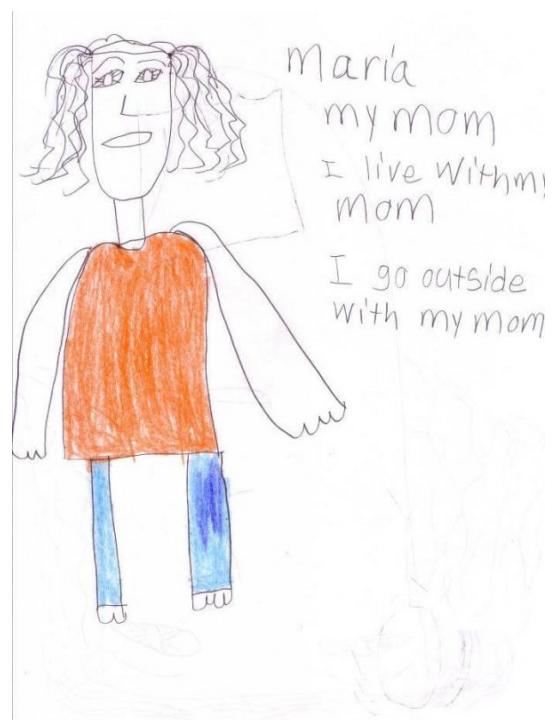
David drew this using a computer mouse in a painting program. There is definite resemblance in the hair.

David drew me in a Pace art course



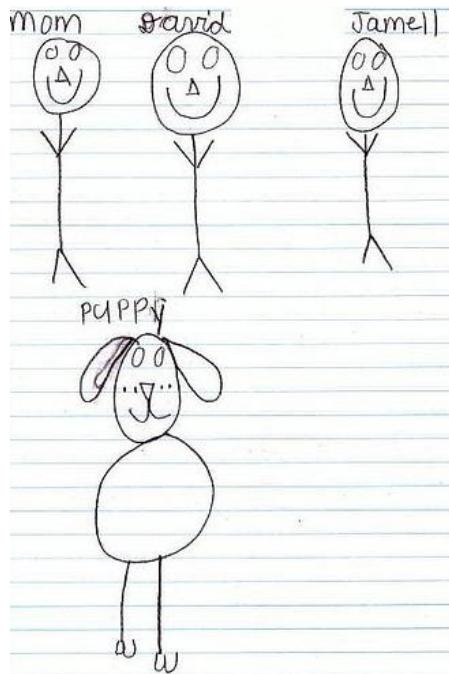
During our time in a Pace Drawing II course, David drew a picture of me in charcoal.

David's drawing of his mom



David drew this in class on printing paper using pencil and crayon.

David's Drawing



David drew his family during our last meeting. He enjoys sketching and might like to study it in school. I've blocked out his last name to protect David's privacy.

My Mid-Term Reflections Journal

"Web Design for Non-Profits" fails to fully encompass the experiences of this CIS course. I signed up for this class hoping to fulfill one of Pace's requirements and nothing more. Instead, I met a fascinating individual with autism named David and am in the process of helping him prepare for a future after high school with the help of my partner Kaitlynn. To help me navigate the world of disability, I referred to "DisabilityLand" by Brightman. The author offers some interesting anecdotes to stimulate the residents of DisabilityLand--a place for those touched by physical or developmental disabilities. It helped me look at my interactions with David in a different light. I realize that the task of helping David develop a fulfilling future will offer its unique challenges but we're all working hard to set David up for success.

Planning for someone else's welfare is not something I had ever done before. Ever the diligent student, I learned that I would need a CIS course to graduate from Pace and set out to fulfill that requirement so that I could focus on taking classes within my major. Web-development, I thought, might even be helpful to my future long-term goal of opening an animal rescue non-profit "Dog and Cat Preservation Society" which thus far has been more of a dream than a goal. The syllabus would come as a surprise but I felt I'd be ready to work with disabled individuals given my

previous volunteering experience with Seaside Riding Academy which offers therapeutic horse riding lessons to kids with disabilities. Also, as a psychology major, I already knew quite a bit about autism and felt prepared for the hands-on experience. I was to be partnered with another Pace student as there were fewer AHRC students than Pace students in the class. My Pace partner Kaitlynn is bright, relaxed and very easy to work with. She has a cousin with autism so she, too, has been touched by a person with disability.

And then we met David and had our expectations shattered. At first, he seemed quiet and reserved. He wasn't terribly talkative but was extremely cooperative during the initial meet and greet. When I asked him to pose for a photo, he made a forced neutral expression. During our second meeting, the three of us went to the Pace bookstore where David selected a Pace T-shirt, cap and drawstring bag. He was very happy with his new outfit and couldn't stop smiling. Starting that day, David was much more relaxed in his interactions with me and Kaitlynn. We learned some background information about him and his interests, started saying our hellos and goodbyes with hugs and David would now smile wide in every picture. We helped him set up an email and Facebook accounts and I was surprised to see how happy this made him. I brought in colored crayons and David gladly drew several pictures by request. He was very proud of his drawings and showed them off to our classmates.

However, trying to understand David's interests was not an easy task. He is vocal and was quick to volunteer some information, such as his favorite movie. Some other things were not quite as simple. From that first meeting, I realized that we may encounter difficulties when it comes to communication. David is very laid-back and easy-going so he appears to like everything. When asked a question, he is often unable to offer a direct response. When presented with options, he frequently selects the option last presented. I realized that whatever knowledge I may have possessed about autism was insufficient and would not help me in this situation. Kaitlynn, who had personal experience with autism, was also having the same difficulty. In an effort to help us figure out what David really likes as opposed to just having him agree to options presented to him, I spoke with Martin from ARHR. Martin confirmed my suspicions that David really does like everything and does not discriminate between favorite colors or school subjects. Knowing that David likes to draw, I attempted a creative solution. I asked David to draw people in his life and identify them as being either from school or home as we had difficulty establishing the members of his family. To my surprise, David was able to efficiently place a triangle around the people he knew from school and a circle around those from home. With this bit of ingenuity, we learned that David's home life does not include a dad and he has several friends at school.

Kaitlynn and I are exploring different opportunities for David's future. We have decided to look into both employment possibilities as well as educational one. Kaitlynn is focusing on possible jobs and is considering data entry or stock person positions. I am focusing on researching schools, 2-year colleges and vocational schools in David's neighborhood. Currently, I'm considering a non-degree college program where David can learn computer skills for possible employment and take drawing classes which he thoroughly enjoys. Also, if David can earn a diploma or a course completion certificate, he will increase his earning potential. When David draws or sketches, he entire face lights up and one needs only to look at him to see how much he enjoys the experience. We began

creating our powerpoint presentation and David did great reading the first few slides. For the final presentation, I feel confident that he'll be able to present his person-centered planning project on his own.

David has a way of surprising me. At first, I questioned whether he can present this project but I now realize that such a mindset is more a reflection of my lack of experience with DisabilityLand, as Alan Brightman puts it, than any ability David possesses. Having read this book, I realized that people are people, whether disabled or not. Just like the rest of us, disabled people want to live in communities, want to experience the joys and pains of growing up, to use the computer and to just live their lives. I particularly appreciated the story on page sixty in which a girl of 13 who also happened to be a little person, said to a boy of about five that she became that size after her mother left her in the tub for too long. Besides being comical, the story also illustrates that not all disabled people are nice, just like not all non-disabled people are nice. There is a wide range of characters out there and the author experienced this first-hand when he discovered that a blind boy in his school's class was a "first-class jerk," as he calls him on page 86. Just like me, before his experience with disability, the author held some pre-conceived notion of what disabled people ought to be and, just like me, was forced to let those go.

We all do it everyday and don't even realize it. We avoid asking questions about disability ask for fear of making ourselves uncomfortable. We casually neglect to place bathroom mirrors at wheelchair height. We teach a man permanently confined to an institution the positively useless task of writing his name in script just because that's what we are used to and are comfortable with. The author himself was guilty of this when he neglected to include a sugar-free beverage option for a diabetic man at one of his disability-themed events. No one is immune from carelessness but being aware of just how few differences separate those who are "retardate" from those who are "normate," in the words of one disabled man, can help us bridge that gap. Like the Apple engineers who gained an appreciation for the difficulties in using a computer with only a pencil in the mouth, those who have never been touched by a person with disability can learn to view disabled individuals in a new light.

This view opened up to me, too, when I began making connections between the book and my experiences with David. While it is true that David has particular limitations, this does not justify treating him differently from the rest of us. He has the same aspirations to pursue his interests as myself and Kaitlynn. After spending just a few hours with David, I learned what a warm, sweet, kind person he is. These qualities are shared by a wide variety of individuals, both disabled and not disabled, and they make David all the more endearing. David has helped me understand DisabilityLand better and appreciate his personality all the more. I feel confident that me and Kaitlynn will be able to help David plan for a very bright future.

My Final Reflections Journal

Today, our project culminated in the final PowerPoint presentations. David, myself and my Pace partner Kaitlynn presented our work to the class. It would be easy to say that this concludes my participation in the course and any further involvement in its content but the impact of this experience will be felt for years to come. Having met David and been exposed to his way of life, his views, and tastes left me with a peculiar sensation of being affected in a way I never anticipated and never before experienced. I will look back on this course, the difficulties and opportunities it presented with a childhood-like nostalgia for something that didn't always go smoothly but is now dearly missed.

At first, I encountered some challenges when learning how to interact with David. He was so easy-going and compliant that he could not name a single thing he disliked. When meeting a person without disability, I would not have given this a second thought. However, given my limited experience with the disabled community, I necessarily attributed this type of personality to disability. It took a conversation with David's teacher for me to understand that David happens to be a naturally extremely sweet person who truly does not have a care in the world; this is just his character. It was at that point that I started to realize that my perception of David's experience is inaccurate.

Because David has limited ability for self-expression, I assumed that he is unable to follow the world around him on par with the rest of us. My expectations were lower than his abilities. And then he found ways to surprise me. Where others would lose interest in a menial task such as a typing test, David showed incredible focus and attention. Whereas some of the students in the course were more limited in the capacity for emotional expression, David was forthcoming in saying that he missed us, laughing, shaking hands and hugging. Interestingly, it was also from his teacher that I learned about David being taught social cues such as high-fives. David uses these so fluently and naturally as to easily mislead everyone that this is completely innate.

And then I realized the value of support in David's life. With the support of AHRC staff, he learned how to communicate through social cues with perfect mastery. If I had not spoken with his teacher, I never would have guessed that David's 'thumbs-up' and 'high-fives' were taught to him. Prior to the class, I was under the impression that David, along with others who have disabilities, are permanently burdened by their circumstances and will require continuous ongoing special needs services for the remainder of their lives. Having understood through my interactions with David how incorporated temporary support becomes into the personality and relationships of an

individual, my imaginary bar of ability for David began to rise. And from that point on, the more we spent time together, the more I learned about David, the more he seemed like any other teenager.

I started looking for supportive environments where David could strengthen current skills, learn new ones, and work toward complete independence. I researched educational opportunities for David while my Pace partner Kaitlynn focused on possible jobs. Early on, we learned that David enjoyed art so I set out to give him the experience of taking a real college-level drawing course. I planned the process and for weeks coordinated with the course instructor and the art course professor to allow David to sit in on a Drawing II course at Pace. The art professor was less than understanding about disability but the experience was tremendously enjoyable and extremely important for David.

Having seen David in a college-level classroom setting, I felt confident that, with a bit of support, he will be able to attend a non-special needs educational institution. After further research, I confirmed that Pace offers everything that David would find helpful: a variety of art courses, tuition assistance, disability services, and non-degree programs including one in Personal Enrichment. To give him some options, I also researched Kingsborough Community College where some art courses are taught outdoors and use the beautiful beachside campus as inspiration for imaginative work or still-life drawing. Kingsborough also has disability services, is cost-effective in comparison with Pace, has non-degree as well as certificate programs and can be attended solely on the weekends if needed. Finally, I looked at the Art Students League of New York which is an organization dedicated exclusively to the arts and offering a variety of courses including drawing, sculpting, painting, and printmaking. The small classes are affordable with varying scheduling options so that if David chose to work instead of attending college, he could still pursue art.

Trying to think in a logistical manner, I considered the practical aspects of traveling to school or work. David picks things up easily and with a bit of help, undoubtedly could learn how to travel on his own. As a result, I included a slide on 'travel-training'—a specialized program offered through AHRC we learned about when visiting an AHRC center as a class. Travel training teaches individuals with disabilities how to travel independently, what routes to take, which train or bus lines are most convenient, and how to respond in event of service changes. When I suggested this concept to David's teacher, he felt that David is ready for this type of a program. Once he goes through the training, knowing how to swipe a metrocard will become as second nature to David as shaking hands.

Paying for school is always a struggle for me, so I thought that researching ways to pay for school-related expenses would benefit David. I looked at a number of organizations which offer assistance to the disabled and

included their information in the presentation. The National Autism Association offers scholarships. The New York State Children and Youth with Special Health Care Needs offers adult day care services which may support David's participation in a travel-training program. The U.S. Department of Education also has several grants for which David could qualify.

Wanting the rest of the class to perceive David as the easy-going gentle spirit that I have come to know, I created a video compilation for the presentation. Meticulously, I cut and pasted from the bits and pieces of video I took of David earlier during our tour of the campus. I made sure to include some introductory information about his family and also some of the experiences he, Kaitlynn, and I shared during our time together. The final version included David talking about family life on a garden bench, him drawing the art course, and playing basketball in the Pace gym. One could easily visualize David as a current student attending Pace.

With the help and support of his family and the staff at AHRC Middle High School, I feel confident that David could achieve these educational goals. I am not certain if David fully understands the implications of this program for his future, but, given my previous experiences with him, it is a pretty good guess that he understands much more than he lets on. Because David communicates differently, it would be impossible for me to ask him what impact this course has had on him. I cannot know whether he will implement the person-centered plan we developed but I feel that the project gave him some tools and options from which to choose.

Either way, I am sure that all of us enjoyed spending time together. David was all smiles when I brought in crayons and asked him to draw pictures for us. With a bit of help in the art class, he picked up the idea of looking at the object he is drawing and was very proud to show off his work. At the gym, we could barely tear him away from the basketball; all he wanted was to shoot hoops all day long. The smiles and laughter will not be forgotten.

Although today may have been my day time with David, the impact he left on my life will remain indefinitely. In my time with him, I learned that David has the same emotional needs as those of us not dealing with disabilities, and, just like the rest of us, he is capable of reaching realistic goals. Perhaps most importantly, I learned to reserve judgment and be more open-minded toward those unlike myself. Going forward, every time I encounter a disabled individual, I will view them as a full-fledged member of society, deserving and capable of achieving great things. All thanks to David.



I thought that KCC might be a good option for David. It's relatively inexpensive in comparison with private institutions. It offers a wide variety of art courses in different media. It has morning, day, evening and weekend class schedules. It offers non-degree programs and certificate programs. There is convenient shuttle from the nearest subway station directly onto campus. And the campus itself is an absolutely beautiful beachfront property.

Pace University



Though a tad more expensive, Pace offers a variety of scholarships for its students. There are courses to suit different schedules. A variety of art classes is offered. Pace has services for students with disabilities. Besides offering non-degree programs, it also offers a program in Personal Enrichment.

The Art Students League of New York



This organization offers affordable course on a rolling basis, without having to worry about semester schedules. There are day and weekend classes available in every kind of art media including drawing, painting, sculpting, and printmaking.

My Certificate of Recognition of Service



Certificate of Service Learning Participation

This is to certify that

Olga Fursova

*In recognition of your exceptional participation in the
AHRC New York City and PACE University Partnership*

Fall Semester 2011

James Lawler

Professor of Information Systems
PACE University

Christina Muccioli

Director of Education
AHRC New York City

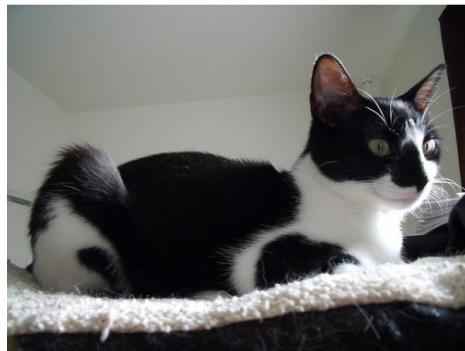
James J Mara

Principal of AHRC Middle/High School
AHRC New York City

My Other Service During or Since Semester – What I Have Been Doing in Service

I routinely foster cats and/or kittens in my home so that they can be adopted out to good permanent homes. I work with another private individual (though we hope to eventually set up our own non-profit rescue) and take animals in from city streets (dumped there by their former owners) or from referrals of other rescuers or organizations needing help. My specialty is wild and feral kittens--those who were born and grew up on the streets or were dumped at a very early age. I socialize them, make sure they get proper medical care and when they're perfect lapcats, adopt them out. Here are the ones I'm currently fostering:

Pangaea



Pangaea is an adorable imperfect tuxedo girl of about half a year. She's the gentlest of creatures and a total lap cat. Pangaea enjoys chasing the floor for absolutely no reason and running after anything stringy.

Pandora



Pandora is an adorable brown tabby/white girl of about half a year. She loves her kitty toys and afternoon naps.

Sweetie Pie



Sweetie Pie is so named because he is the sweetest, most mellow cat you'll find. At about five, he's got a lot of great years left. Sweetie Pie has a heart murmur requiring medication so he needs an especially understanding family to care for him.

Maggie



Over the course of this semester, Maggie found herself a new permanent home. Her new family has renamed her Leah and lavishes her with attention and affection.