

## How Will the Artism Creativity Center Continue?

*Rachel Jin, Campolindo High School  
Asbjorn Osland, San José State University*

*This case was prepared by the authors and is intended to be used as a basis for class discussion. The views represented here are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the views of the Society for Case Research. The views are based on professional judgment. Copyright © 2017 by the Society for Case Research and the authors. No part of this work may be reproduced or used in any form or by any means without the written permission of the Society for Case Research.*

### Introduction

The main dilemmas faced by Artism Creativity Center (ACC), a nonprofit organization based in California, were leadership succession and how to set up a lasting organizational infrastructure, including a board of directors and fund raising. Mai, the current executive director, would likely leave at the end of her senior year of high school and attend college, probably out of state. Given the lack of a funding base, the successor would likely have to be a volunteer. What characteristics should the successor have? Mai and Shu, her mother and an experienced art teacher, also needed to select the right people for their board, if they were to build a lasting organization. They wanted people with a commitment to autism, and the financial wherewithal to donate, say \$1,000 annually.

Mai's mother, Shu, emigrated from China in 1995 with her husband, who received his doctorate in the United States and pursued a career as a successful entrepreneur. Shu chose a career in the arts; she graduated from Shanghai University's fine arts department. She had 12 years of experience teaching art to children. She later majored in studio art at San José State University and spent four years teaching art to local children. Shu was the ACC art adviser, who created programs, curated curricula, and supervised volunteers. Mai, a senior in high school, served as the president of the organization, and was in charge of writing class material, sending out class notification emails, and reaching out to other programs. To date the organization had been supported through donations from their family, roughly \$10,000 over the past 12 months, without a planned budget.

The father, with an engineering doctorate, was a serial entrepreneur who had created various successful companies that were sold so he provided consultative assistance when needed. The family had the financial resources to continue funding ACC at its current level. However, the family understood that an on-going viable organization should diversify its funding base beyond one family.

## **ACC**

ACC helped students with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) to use art to connect with the world, as well as help others better understand the thinking processes of these children. ASD was a mental disorder that affected cognitive development and impaired communication and language skills. “Spectrum” meant levels of disability, often characterized by social interaction and communication difficulties, limited interests and repetitive behaviors. Individuals with ASD typically showed symptoms in the first two years of childhood. Some individuals with ASD functioned in society and maintained employment while others were severely disabled (National Institute of Mental Health, 2016). Volunteers taught students shading, tracing, sketching and more in their artistic journeys. The ACC partnered with local art institutions and instructors. ACC based its approach in part on practical experience and also on research of the field.

### **Art Therapy for Autism**

The Autism Society of America in conjunction with the American Art Therapy Association (2016) developed a toolkit and resources for healthcare professionals and individuals on the autism spectrum and family members and caregivers. Autistic people may feel overstimulated with limited communication skills; art therapy provided an outlet for expression and emotion and a vehicle for communication. Credentialed art therapists have masters’ degrees and are certified by the Art Therapy Credentials Board. There are three levels: Registered Art Therapist, Board Certified Art Therapist, and Art Therapy Certified Supervisor.

ASD students had benefitted from art-related instruction. In a study of a program for ASD children ages 11 through 18, the researchers found that students benefitted in assertion scores (i.e., positive expressions), decreased internalizing behaviors (e.g., sadness and anxiety), hyperactivity, and problem behavior (Epp, 2008).

### **Background of ACC**

In 2012, Mai and her mother, Shu, began teaching art to autistic children at Angelove Family Support Center, a separate non-profit organization dedicated to supporting Chinese immigrant families with autistic children. Mai first started interacting with children with autism there when she was in 8th grade. She worked as a volunteer until the end of 9th grade. It was there that Mai learned more about children with autism and developed an interest in helping them grow and develop. Shu joined Angelove Family Support Center as a volunteer along with Mai.

The children’s parents soon began to realize that their children were improving in artistic skills and they were developing more quickly cognitively and emotionally. More students joined the program, and Mai and Shu created ACC, a new non-profit organization, and started to give monthly group classes.

Nearly four years after the program began, ACC had 30 volunteers, all high school students with at least five years of art experience, and 30 students, ranging from 4 to 13 years old. Volunteers were trained in working with autistic children before they began serving at ACC. Every volunteer had to sign an agreement with ACC to ensure the quality and continuity of service.

ACC had also developed many effective teaching methods for its students. The students used these methods and skills to create beautiful art pieces that expressed thoughts and told stories that the students wanted to communicate.

ACC was listed as a nonprofit public benefit organization (no. 3751898) on February 9, 2015 but not yet registered as a charity, which it was supposed to complete (Registry of Charitable Trusts, email, September 13, 2016). However, it was granted tax exempt status under IRS code 501(c)(3), so it could receive tax deductible charitable contributions.

### **ACC Curriculum and Related Matters**

The group class was held monthly. The adviser, as well as all volunteers and students, attended this session and worked together on formal art projects. The group class usually was held on one Saturday every month from 1 p.m. to 4 p.m. The class was divided into 2 sessions, 1 p.m. to 2:30 p.m., and 2:30 p.m. to 4:00 p.m. A notification email was sent out a week or more in advance before each session. During the class, there was a separate class held for parents, who were given lessons on how to assist their student in their at-home practice.

In a one-on-one class, the volunteer helped the student work on any pending projects that still needed to be completed. Volunteers also helped the student come up with ideas for their monthly theme submission. Volunteers scheduled these classes individually with the student's parents, but had to copy all emails regarding private class scheduling to ACC to guarantee professionalism.

Sometimes, Shu gave one-to-one lessons to the student, so that both the student and parent learned. The frequency of these private classes depended on how much progress the student had made. The adviser taught new art skills to the student and gave advice to parents on how to help their child at home. The scheduling of these classes was discussed individually between the adviser and parent. Each class was around two to three hours.

All classes at ACC were free of charge, though parents could purchase their child's supplies for projects.

At ACC the learning process was divided into two parts. The first part consisted of the learning and creativity stages, and the second consisted of the application stage.

During the learning part of the process, students were taught to open their minds to artistic concepts and to use these concepts to create their own cartoons. Students were taught technical elements and principles; for example, the lesson on color included sections on analogous colors, complementary colors, and warm and cool colors. This helped the student link different colors with different emotions and to develop their own unique color palettes.

Students then moved into the creativity stage, learning to create their own unique characters. Students started this process by first learning to copy cartoons presented to them and modifying certain lines, shapes, and features of the image. Soon, they were able to create their own

cartoons using different lines, shapes and patterns. During this time, they also learned to use their characters to tell a visual story and create scenes. Students learned to express emotion through their work using colors and facial expressions, as well as use concepts of space and direction to create a sense of perspective in their drawings.

One of the most important aspects of the creativity stage was the at-home free drawing activities that students completed on a daily basis. Every day, students completed 15 to 20 minutes of free drawing, where they could retell the events of their day from their own perspective. These free-drawings were the origins of many of the ideas behind their large projects.

After the creativity stage, students moved to the application stage, where they applied their knowledge to other areas of education, such as reading comprehension. Students moved from drawing to reading short passages of text and answering questions about these texts. By this time, the students should have been familiar with artistic storytelling techniques, and would be asked to sketch each scene to help them visualize and understand the words they read. The process began with the visualizing and verbalizing series of books, which contained easy-to-read stories. As the student progressed from these stories into longer stories and elementary-level novels, the students became familiar with the visualization process and no longer needed to physically sketch out events, characters, and scenes to be able to mentally envision the content of their reading.

The support team included an art adviser, teaching volunteers, information technology volunteers and parents. Parents played the most important role in their child's development. Children with ASD learn in different ways than children without ASD do. Therefore, it was crucial that parents cooperate with their adviser and assigned volunteer to help their children learn and grow. It was critical that parents get the children to sit down and complete at-home assignments, especially in the first six months of the program, where the children may find basic technique training exercises to be tedious.

### **Treatment of Autism**

Though ACC limited itself to art, treatment of autism involved a holistic approach that included family and the appropriate professionals. Services could be delivered at home, a specialized center or an educational facility. Professionals can suggest specific treatments. The child could also have a complicating medical condition not specific to autism that required additional attention. Treatments could include speech and language therapy, occupational therapy, or other professional care. Core treatments specific to autism focused on social and behavioral issues and communication. During the preschool age, autistic children should receive around 25 hours of structured intervention weekly. School-age children should continue receiving structured intervention during the school day (Autism Speaks, 2016).

### **ASD**

Autism Speaks (2016) defined ASD and autism as “general terms for a group of complex disorders of brain development.” Autistic people may have varying degrees of social interaction difficulty, communication problems (both verbal and nonverbal) and adopt repetitive behaviors.

In the May 2013 version of the DSM-5 diagnostic manual the previous subtypes were all grouped under the umbrella ASD. Some individuals with ASD may perform excellently in “visual skills, music, math and art.” The U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (2016) identified around

*1 in 68 American children as on the autism spectrum—a ten-fold increase in prevalence in 40 years. Careful research showed that this increase is only partly explained by improved diagnosis and awareness. Studies also showed that autism is four to five times more common among boys than girls. An estimated 1 out of 42 boys and 1 in 189 girls were diagnosed with autism in the United States.*

It was unknown why there had been an increased prevalence of autism.

### **Services for Autistic Children**

There were public and private services for autism but ACC chose not to avail themselves of them; Shu had enough family money to fund ACC for the moment. One such service was the California Department of Developmental Services (2017) that offered a range of services for autistic children of varying ages:

- Although directed at all people within the Developmental Centers and Community Facility, The Office of Protective Services focused on the clients’ quality of life through law enforcement and fire services.
- Early identification (from birth to 36 months) was vital. Those parents or others involved with a child that might need attention were counseled to contact the appropriate office to determine if early intervention services were warranted.
- There were three residential institutions, located in Orange County, Tulare County and Sonoma County, referred to as developmental centers and one community facility in Riverside County.
- There were 21 regional centers that were nonprofit private corporations that contracted with the Department of Developmental Services. ACC was not one of them given its specialized niche and the lack of need for additional resources. This could change in the future should private funding become unavailable.

There were many other non-profit resources listed on the web including the following:

- Autism Speaks (2016)
- California Autism Foundation (2016)
- Autism Center of Northern California (2016)
- University of California Irvine Health Medical Services Autism and Neurodevelopmental Services (2016)

Perhaps ACC could reach out to such resources in the future should there be a need to support growth or if Shu could no longer finance the organization.

### Nonprofit Management Development

Three areas had not yet been considered thoroughly by Mai and Shu, succession planning, board development, and fund raising. At present ACC functioned like a small independent family business with one location (Investopedia, 2016).

#### Succession Planning

Despite Shu's heavy involvement in running the program, Mai did much of the essential administrative and outreach work as the executive director of the organization, and her position should eventually be filled after she graduated, although Shu could keep it going as an interim director while the search for Mai's successor took place. Mai went online looking for resources for succession planning and thought the "Ten Planning Tips for Leadership Transition" (Council of Nonprofits, 2016a) was a good place to start. She copied the list and then added her comments in italics following the listed comment below:

1. Gain the commitment of board and staff to manage transition intentionally. *This was not a problem since the other principal party was her mother, Shu. Shu had been mentoring Mai to become a leader. Shu wanted her daughter to become a leader so she assumed a secondary, supportive role.*
2. Identify current challenges and those that lie ahead, and the corresponding leadership qualities that are needed to navigate the challenges successfully. *Fundraising was paramount. The successor would have to be familiar with autism and art and be passionate about service in this area.*
3. Consider whether placing an interim leader at the helm was the right path for your nonprofit. *Shu could serve as the interim director if needed.*
4. Draft a timeline for leadership successions that are planned. *Mai was to start college after graduation from high school.*
5. Create an Emergency Leadership Transition Plan to address the timely delegation of duties and authority when there is an unexpected transition or interruption in key leadership. *Again, Shu could deal with this if it became an issue.*
6. Identify leadership development opportunities for staff and board members to expand their leadership skills so that the organization would have a "deeper bench" of future leaders. *There was no active board as yet, so establishing it over the next year was critical.*
7. Cross-train current staff to minimize the disruption from unexpected staffing changes. *There were no staff to train and Shu was familiar with ACC.*
8. Make plans to adequately support newly-placed employees, such as with coaching, mentoring, and defining goals. *This referred to students in ACC and she and her mother were active with them.*
9. Communicate: What would your organization say to stakeholders before, during, and after a transition of leadership? Thoughtful communications were needed in order to support the staff and organization during the transition process. *Once the board was in place Mai or her successor was going to have to get its input in a real dialogue. Boards have the power to hire and fire executive directors like herself so she would have to be attentive and responsive to the board's concerns.*

10. Bring in board members deliberately: Help new board chairs and chief staff leaders feel confident and find their own voices. *She needed to work with the board.*

### Board Development

Mai consulted the Council of Nonprofits (2016b) on boards since the ACC would eventually have to name a board. She found that board members were fiduciaries who directed the organization's viable long-term future through prudent and effective governance practices. The organizational foundation was built on employing the proper executive director (ED). The board worked with the ED on charting an ethical strategy directed at fulfilling the mission. This had to be legal and in compliance with local, state and federal regulations. A sustainable financial plan was also critical so that the organization had the resources it needed. Mai also had to look into insurance for board members in that they should not serve without it. Children with ASD sometimes suffered from behavioral issues and some could get aggressive or upset and present a danger to peers, themselves and ACC staff; a lawsuit could follow if there was someone injured, so insurance was essential.

Mai wanted board members that were interested in autism, possessed special abilities and experience to help with major decisions, donated money to ACC and were part of social networks that would assist ACC. She made up the following list:

1. A deep interest in autism could develop due to a family member or loved one with ASD.
2. A professional interest could also foster commitment to assist people with ASD; perhaps the board candidate worked in a field where people challenged by ASD were part of the client population served.
3. Special abilities could include any professional service needed by an organization or managerial experience and expertise. For example, finance people that worked in high tech had proven particularly effective in the finance committee of another organization she knew of. High tech employment had made them demanding, knowledgeable, vigilant, candid and even confrontational, all desirable qualities in an active board member.
4. Willingness to donate charitably to ACC or have access to other sources of income for ACC was important. Perhaps the potential board member worked as a community liaison for a large respected company in the community. In so doing, he or she might be able to donate grants or resources from his or her employer.

### Fund Raising

Shu's family currently funded ACC. ACC could eventually look at relationships ACC already had with affluent people that had some connection to autism and then also to look at grants. But neither Shu nor Mai had done so as yet.

Selecting the proper board members could facilitate fund raising as well. On many boards there was an expectation that members contribute to the entity through charitable contributions. Affluent art museums might expect multi-million dollar donations whereas smaller nonprofits might look for far less.

One factor to consider was the already high costs families with ASD children were paying, an estimated \$17,000 more per child with ASD compared to one without. As of December 1, 2015, 43 states and the District of Columbia had laws that required insurance coverage of autism services, but each varied in what services were paid. For example, California required “every health insurance policy to provide coverage for behavioral health treatment for pervasive developmental disorder” (National Conference of State Legislatures, 2015).

### **Conclusion**

ACC had grown to 30 instructors and 30 students under the direction of Mai and Shu. To make it a viable organization capable of making an ongoing contribution to serving the autistic, Mai and Shu had to pay attention to selecting Mai’s successor and the establishment of a board that would look at fund raising too. How should they do this?

### **References**

- American Art Therapy Association. (2016). Autism toolkit. Retrieved from: <http://www.arttherapy.org/upload/autismtoolkit.pdf>.
- Autism Center of Northern California. (2016). Retrieved from: <http://www.acnc.org/>.
- Autism Speaks. (2016). Resource Guide – California. Retrieved from: <https://www.autismspeaks.org/resource-guide/state/ca>.
- California Autism Foundation. (2016). Retrieved from: <http://www.calautism.org/understanding-autism/resources/>.
- California Department of Developmental Services. (2017). Retrieved from: <http://www.dds.ca.gov/>.
- Council of Nonprofits. (2016a). Succession Planning for Nonprofits. Retrieved from: <https://www.councilofnonprofits.org/tools-resources/succession-planning-nonprofits>.
- Council of Nonprofits. (2016b). Board roles and responsibilities. Retrieved from: <https://www.councilofnonprofits.org/tools-resources/board-roles-and-responsibilities>.
- Epp, K. M. (2008). Outcome-based evaluation of a social skills program using art therapy and group therapy for children on the autism spectrum. *Children & Schools*, 30(1), 27-36.
- Investopedia. (2016). Mom and Pop. Retrieved from: [www.investopedia.com/terms/m/momandpop.asp](http://www.investopedia.com/terms/m/momandpop.asp).
- National Conference of State Legislatures. (2015). Insurance Coverage for Autism. Retrieved from: <http://www.ncsl.org/research/health/autism-and-insurance-coverage-state-laws.aspx>.



National Institute of Mental Health. (2016). Autism Spectrum Disorder. Retrieved from <http://www.nimh.nih.gov/health/topics/autism-spectrum-disorders-asd/index.shtml>.

University of California Irvine Health Medical Services Autism and Neurodevelopmental Services. (2016). Retrieved from: <http://www.ucirvinehealth.org/medical-services/autism-neurodevelopmental-services/>.

U. S. Centers for Disease Control. (2016). Autism spectrum disorder (ASD) - Data & statistics. Retrieved from: <http://www.cdc.gov/ncbddd/autism/data.html>.