

An Artist's Journey

By Michael Bérubé

When my wife Janet and I first realized that Jamie's work was something significant, and not just our son amusing himself with crayons while he watched YouTube and DVDs in his basement lair, we told ourselves we had to find an outlet for this work. We went to some "outsider art" shows like [the annual event in New York](#), and we thought that he could plausibly be a part of something like that. We just didn't have the faintest idea how to go about making it happen.

Every year for about five years, I promised myself that I would put together a portfolio of his work and then ... what? The "what" part prevented me from putting together the portfolio, summer after summer. Then in 2015 I was putting the finishing touches on my book [Life as Jamie Knows It](#), and our friend and artist extraordinaire Helen O'Leary insisted that samples of his work be included in the book. I mentioned the possibility to the publisher and their response was, "Great idea! And totally crazy expensive. Hey, why don't you make yourself an author's website and upload the images there?"

So that's what I did. I took hundreds of his artworks, designs, and lists, grouped them under various headings, and hired a graphic designer to redesign [my website](#). It had once been a blog, back in the days of blogs, but now it has a page with a link to [Jamie's Etsy shop](#). (image, left)

But still, Jamie knows what's what. He knows museums, he knows galleries, he knows Armory shows. He knows that his father's website is not the same kind of thing at all. So I felt terrible that I didn't know what to do next. All we want is for Jamie to have the best life he can possibly have,

given his myriad interests, abilities, and idiosyncrasies. As any parent would want, right? And we wanted him to know that we loved his work and wanted to share it with the world.

Our friend Jordana Mendelson, a professor of Spanish at New York University who has a teenage boy with Down syndrome, told us about the [Museum of Modern Art \(MoMA\) program "Create Ability."](#)



Jamie is currently creating a special "Tower of Color" artwork piece for the Buddy Walk 2023 Benefit Raffle

It was at MoMA in June 2018 that I met a woman named Rachel Cohen. At the time, Janet was teaching in Ireland, and in one of our video chats insisted that I bring one of Jamie's towers-of-color pieces with me to show the "Create Ability" people. This was good advice, but at the last minute, as Jamie and I left for the museum, I decided instead to take a photo of the two towers-pieces we had framed in the hallway of the little apartment we co-owned with two Penn

State colleagues.

It was a hot, muggy day, so we took a cab. We got a sixty-something cabbie straight out of Central Casting forty years ago—in fact, we got the ghost of Ernest Borgnine from the movie *Escape from New York*. "Where are you from?" asked Jamie, and from him the question is never aggressive—it is a sincerely curious question he asks of everyone of every color, shape, and size.

"Where am I from?" the cabbie replied. "Astoria! But I was born in Greece." "Greece, wow," Jamie said, "we have never been." "We have to go someday," I added. "So whaddya doing in the Museum of Modern Art today?" Mr. Borgnine asked (and he really said "whaddya"). "My art," Jamie replied, elliptically. To which I added, "Seriously, there's a program at the museum showcasing the artwork of people with disabilities, and Jamie has two paintings on exhibit."



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(They weren't his usual work; they were a part of a Create Ability program he had attended a few months earlier, and nothing like the stuff he does on his own. But that was OK.)

"No kidding," said Mr. Borgnine. "Jamie. Are you gonna make a million dollars with your art?"

"No," replied Jamie with aplomb, "Fame." *

That was the day I showed the pic of Jamie's framed towers-of-colors pieces to Rachel Cohen. "Wow," Rachel said. "I know, right?" I replied. "They're really something. But I just don't know where to go or who to talk to about this work. I don't know anything about how to promote outsider art or even whether this would count as outsider art. Can you tell me who I should contact?"

"Me," Rachel said. "This is what I do."

She brought out her phone and showed me the website for [NAP Projects](#).

"OMG," I replied.

And that is how Jamie's big opening happened on Wednesday night, August 22, 2018, in a little gallery in New York's Lower East Side. Rachel asked us to send her 6-8 towers, so we sent eight. And just like that, [Jamie's work was on display along with art by five other artists with intellectual and/or developmental disabilities](#).

** There is a footnote to this story. Almost exactly one year later, Jamie and I got a cab to the Jewish Museum on the Upper East Side ... and we got the same cab driver, who remembered us from the previous year and remembered that he had taken us to another museum. We told him, to his great delight, that Jamie did indeed achieve "fame" that day and had had four art shows since then. We learned that his name was Jerry, and I couldn't begin to imagine how many people Jerry had had in his cab over the preceding year—and yet he remembered us. More to the point, I am sure that he remembered Jamie. Jamie is much more memorable than I am.*

It was a remarkable evening (*photo below, taken through glass*). Jamie had a wonderful time. His work sold out, by the way. He then had two more shows, one on Staten Island and one in upstate Orangeburg, New York, where he was part of very large group shows; and in March 2019 he had a month-long solo show in the Schlow Library in State College, featuring over twenty of his artworks. (*bottom photo, courtesy of Maria Burchill*)

Galleries closed during the pandemic, of course, so things have been pretty quiet for Jamie since that



Schlow exhibit. But he has kept making art; he has two pieces framed and hung in the reception area of The Arc of Centre County offices, and from September 1–24, 2023, Jamie's work will be part of a group show at the [Bellefonte Art Museum](#) in Centre County PA.

Jamie was very proud to be featured on the Centre Region Down Syndrome Society's 2021 Buddy Walk T-shirt and is equally proud to be on the judging panel of the 2023 T-Shirt Art Contest. ■

