

# A Profile of Simplicity in This Spectrum Called Life

April is Autism Awareness Month

By Amanda Kuehn



Char Orina at the Futures Explored visual arts studio in Lafayette. Photo Amanda Kuehn

Char Orina is a thinker and an artist. She likes Tudor houses and big fat fish. She is fascinated with jewelry and collects bracelets and lip-stick, though she rarely wears either. She takes her coffee black and in large quantities. She doesn't like gossip. She does like scary movies.

In many ways, Orina is just your average 25-year-old. But while others her age might be pursuing careers or hanging with friends, Orina, who has an autism spectrum disorder, spends much of her time alone, working through her feelings. "I'm really working on being stronger and getting through the rough angry parts," she said. "Those are the parts that keep you from doing what you want to do." Art is one way Orina does this. "I have a lot of emotions and they come out in my art," she said.

Autism isn't Orina's defining feature, but it is a big part of her reality. "People that have autism see the world differently," she said during an interview at Futures Explored in Lafayette. "We can still learn, but maybe need to be taught one-on-one, or to practice a little more." Orina paused, looking at the pictures on the walls of the visual arts studio. "But if it's something we're interested in we'll probably learn it fast."

"Sometimes I need some space," she said. "When I'm not working or at the program I just like to sit on a bench and have coffee and enjoy the sun and try to be in the moment." This is also how Orina characterized her childhood, as a time to "just be in the moment."

It can be difficult for Orina to extend herself. Empathy and social interaction are common struggles for those with autism. "This is the most I've talked all week," she confided from behind a pair of sunglasses. A sort of distancing barrier, the sunglasses rarely come off.

Futures Explored, a day program that provides life skills and work-related training to adults where Orina has been coming for the past four years, gently encourages the young woman to form relationships. Each day she and the other clients are given a choice of activities ranging from brain buster games to local news discussions. Orina prefers the art studio. "I do the best I can," she said. "You can kind of see there's a lot of stuff happening," she noted, pulling out a brightly-colored painting featuring dark-lined faces, a lop-sided house and imaginative creatures. Orina makes art in the studio on Tuesday and Friday mornings and Tuesday afternoons.

Orina also works at Nifty Thrift in Lafayette, where she prices clothes, shoes and jewelry four hours a day, four days a week. The jewelry is her favorite. "You never know what kind of jewelry you're going to find," Orina said. She also enjoys the free coffee, stating that it gives her the

extra energy she needs to be out in public.

The rest of Orina's weekdays are spent at Futures, which is open Monday through Friday from 9 a.m. to 3 p.m. "I mostly learn from the guys and ladies here that know things that I don't know," she commented. "Everyone here is smart."

According to the National Autism Association, autism is the fastest growing developmental disorder in the U.S. It is a bio-neurological developmental disability that impacts the development of the brain in the areas of social interaction, communication skills and cognitive function. Autism is a spectrum disorder, meaning those who have it may exhibit a wide range of social and communicative impairments. They may also exhibit repetitive patterns of behavior, interests or activities. Many individuals with autism spectrum disorders also have underlying medical issues that can exacerbate their condition.

No one knows what causes autism. Many are born with it. Some parents have reported sharp regression in their children following early immunizations, though published mainstream science does not acknowledge a causal link between the two. The National Institute of Health recognizes that there is most likely a genetic predisposition, but states that an environmental component must also be present.

Autism presents a wide range of challenges for those who live with it. Treatment and intervention may include behavioral treatment, medicine, or both. It may require a rigid schedule, occupational therapy, speech pathology or a special diet. As more and more children are being diagnosed with autism (the current rate is 1 in 88), early intervention programs are growing.

There is no "typical" where autism is concerned, according to Barbara Townsend, program coordinator at Futures Explored. Orina is one case, but she is no more or less typical than anyone else when it comes to describing what it is like to live with autism. There is no cure, but there is hope. "Orina probably deals with the dark feelings every day," Townsend confided. But Orina is making great strides.

Though she does not think of herself as a wise woman, having learned how to deal with her own darkness, Orina has special advice to share. "Live for today and learn from yesterday," she offered. "Be yourself and no one else."

It is good advice to follow, no matter where you fall on life's spectrum.

To learn more about autism spectrum disorders, visit [www.autismspeaks.org](http://www.autismspeaks.org) or [nationalautismassociation.org](http://nationalautismassociation.org). For information about Futures Explored, visit [www.futures-explored.org](http://www.futures-explored.org).

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