

Marble Jam continues providing services for children with autism during COVID-Ep14

\*\*\* Recorded on December 11, 2020. \*\*\* [Listen to it here.](#)

JOAN BANKS-SMITH: 00:04 [music] This is Joan Banks-Smith, creative producer for Kessler Foundation. In May of 2020, Kessler Foundation awarded nearly \$1 million in COVID-19 emergency grant funding for nonprofits faced with the challenges of serving people with disabilities in New Jersey. The recipient organizations were current or former grantees of Kessler Foundation's employment grant program. Kessler Foundation provided 37 grants of \$10,000 to \$40,000 to help with unanticipated needs and expenses. In this mini-series, we talked with grantees, past and present, who received emergency funding to help offset the cost of both technology and personal protective equipment. The various organizations had to adopt alternative ways of connecting people with one another in keeping staff and clients safe. Today, I'm speaking remotely with Anna Bager, president of MarbleJam Center for Creative Arts & Enrichment, in Hackensack, New Jersey. Welcome, Anna. And thanks for taking the time to speak with us this afternoon.

CAROLYN SUERO: 01:07 Well, thank you so much for having me, Joan. I'm happy to be here.

BANKS-SMITH: 01:11 I'd like to start by asking you about the organization and how it serves those with challenges.

SUERO: 01:16 About, I would say, 14 years ago, we really identified a gap in some of the services for children with autism spectrum disorders in after-school and aftercare programming. They really didn't exist. So that was sort of the impulse behind creating a center or, actually, starting with a program called the Social CATs Autism Program that utilized creative arts and creative arts therapeutic approaches in meeting the needs of these children specifically through art, music, and movement modalities. At that time, we piloted the program, and it was successful. We learned a lot. We brought in Dr. Suzi Tortora to really help us with developing the program and being responsible to the therapeutic process. Dr. Tortora is a very well-known creative arts therapist and psychologist who works exclusively with children on the spectrum and others with special needs and medical health challenges. So we got that going. And then we noticed that, over the years, we needed to create more programming that was more customized to the needs of the individual as they grew through the educational system, the special education services, and behavioral approaches that really helped put them on the right track to learning and grow.

SUERO: 02:55 So we realized, "Oh, we need a space." Instead of borrowing spaces, we started renting spaces. And we've developed our own center in Tenafly, New Jersey, I would say within five years in. And now, we have a full-service ADA Arts Center in Hackensack, thanks to all of the wonderful foundations and supports that we have received over the years supporting what we're doing. So some of the expansion programs that we've been able to put together are vocational-oriented, but specific in the areas of the arts and educational enrichment like graphic design, and photography, and filmmaking. And we've also expanded into theater arts and started a drama jam theatrical troupe. And at this point, we really are an inclusive arts center. So we have all types of individuals and all ages and all age categories that we are

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serving with-- these really wonderful opportunities for self-exploration, and skills, and socialization, peers, and performance. It's a really beautiful place.

BANKS-SMITH: 04:16

It sounds amazing. How has the emergency grant fund helped your organization throughout the pandemic?

SUERO: 04:24

Kessler came through with immediate support. Because when we were told we needed to close our facility on March 16, that ended any kind of revenue stream for us immediately. We are authorized providers with the state of New Jersey under NJDDD, which is New Jersey Department of Developmental Disabilities and Human Health Services as well as the Department of Children and Families. So we went from a census of 91 regular participants and students to 0. And it was very stressful. We didn't know what to do. So when Kessler came through with the grant, it went to expenses that we never even thought we would ever have to put in our line item and budget. So part of it, the money, went to utilities, that we didn't have. Part of it went through to insurance, which is additional workers compensation insurance that we're obligated to pay, maintenance, disinfecting the facility. But most of the bulk of the support really went to our ability to provide remote services because we were not receiving any support for remote services initially from the state. So that included the drama jam rehearsals that went from in-person to remote. Because had we stopped those rehearsals, we wouldn't be able to have our performance in September. The Social CATs Autism Program, we went to remote services. We had no ability to build for that service.

SUERO: 06:17

So we were able to maintain our professional staff throughout, I would say, through at least the next four months of services for that program. We were also in a position to have to counsel families on how to use Zoom, number one, because it was such a new technology for people. And if they didn't have the bandwidth, and they didn't have the technical intuitiveness to be able to get into Zoom, so we had to support our families and some of our students to be able to get onto those remote classes. And then, additionally, we had families. As we really moved into the thick of this pandemic and isolation, our families had their adult learners with disabilities at home, and regression started to happen with behaviors that had been previously extinguished. I don't know if you understand or maybe your listeners don't understand that people with autism spectrum disorders and anxiety disorders that don't have continuity of care and support, they tend to regress in a way to try to self-manage their own anxiety and isolation. So we needed to reach out to our families with our professional staff to give them guidance on how to manage these emerging behaviors. Some of them had been extinguished for years. That was very, very challenging. And because of Kessler, we were able to provide the time and support that was needed to the families without hesitation.

BANKS-SMITH: 08:05

It's really good to hear that the fund has helped out in so many different ways. Did your performance in September go online?

SUERO: 08:12

We just invited the immediate family and had two production nights. And we used our facility as the stage, so social distanced people. Our troupe was social distanced

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and masked. Thank goodness it turned out to be really a success, maybe not in having a full audience, but what was really nice was that the families and the students, the troupe, they really appreciated us taking the extra effort to hold the performances and maintain the safety of everybody involved.

- BANKS-SMITH: 08:51      Being able to perform, even though it was in a limited capacity, I'm sure was special for everybody.
- SUERO: 08:57              Well, thank you. I'm really very grateful to Kessler for the support they provided us over the years. It's a wonderful foundation. And we're just really thrilled to be a part of it.
- BANKS-SMITH: 09:12      Well, thank you, Anna, for sharing that MarbleJam was able to continue support their remote services with our emergency grant.
- SUERO: 09:19              Thank you.
- BANKS-SMITH: 09:21      [music] To learn more about Kessler Foundation Center for Grantmaking and the MarbleJam Center for Arts & Enrichment, links are in the program notes. Tuned in to our podcast series lately? Join our listeners in 90 countries who enjoy learning about the work of Kessler Foundation. Be sure and subscribe to our SoundCloud channel, Kessler Foundation, for more podcasts like this. Follow us on Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram. Listen to us on Apple Podcast, Spotify, SoundCloud, or wherever you get your podcasts. This podcast was recorded on December 10th, 2020, remotely and was edited and produced by Joan Banks-Smith, creative producer for Kessler Foundation.