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## **A Business to Call His Own: The Story Behind DK Arts**

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By Jim Corey with Dylan Kuehl and Terri Rose

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*"Keep on saying to yourself, 'Yes I can.' This is all about, 'Yes I can do it.'"*

*--Dylan Kuehl*

People who meet Terri Rose recognize her immediately as a passionate and tenacious advocate for her son Dylan, a successful 25-year-old artist, public speaker, and business owner in Olympia, WA, who happens to experience Down syndrome.

"From the ages of five to ten, Dylan was a victim of physical abuse. When the source of the pain finally left his family home, Dylan could begin to heal. Unfortunately, for Dylan the pain did not end there. After the home was safe, a neighborhood friend physically tormented him with a garden hose. Needless to say, this friendship ended immediately. Also around this time, Dylan quite suddenly lost a family member and a friend. Not an easy transition for anyone to understand and accept, especially a young child with Down syndrome. At 11, he began hitting others, including me. I was afraid of him," Terri states flatly.



Dylan sells his products to influential author Dale Dileo, who wrote Raymond's Room. Photo courtesy of Terri Rose.

Instead of sending him away to a residential school for kids with behavioral challenges, she purchased him a drum set and found him an art and movement instructor. "These tools helped him navigate out of the dark and into the light," she says.

After a year of keeping his dance and art private, Dylan began to share it with his family. Watching Dylan dance made Terri tingle with excitement. He was working through his emotions and building confidence. The therapy transformed his daily life in a positive direction. "Disruptive and aggressive behaviors can be a signal the person needs a new outlet to express their inner world. Art, movement, martial arts, and a drum set saved my son's life without pharmaceuticals. His anger would have spiraled out of control until he or someone else got seriously hurt."

Dylan adds, "I needed something for my hands to do – and most importantly learn to control my temper."

At 14, he started martial arts, which became an invaluable tool allowing him to achieve self-confidence, control, and an outlet for his emotions. His past and current martial arts instructors always had high expectations of him and used humor to keep him "on the mat." The "team" learned that communication, consistency, and high expectations to show appropriate behavior to reach goals are important.

Throughout Dylan's life, Terri helped build and rebuild community relationships and activities for her son. In high school, they found a peer mentor who became his lifelong friend. Terri learned about person-centered planning and invited family, friends, and professionals to "futures planning" meetings to discuss relationships in the community, his skills and talents, what works and does not work for Dylan, ideas for a fuller life, his Big Dream, and concrete, next-step action plans. "The planning meetings allowed Dylan to talk about his vision for his life. A facilitator put words and ideas together into a piece of art alive with color and hope. Since the very first meeting, Dylan's life and those of the team have moved forward in positive directions. These meetings bring people together. The ripple effect is real. Everyone benefits," she says. "It is never too late to begin planning for the future. The team should include people who believe in your child's strengths and abilities and say, 'yes' to their dreams. Teams change over time. Always be looking for new members."



Dylan and his Mom, Terri Rose. The dynamic duo say: "We make a great team." Photo courtesy of Clara Link.

"I am patient yet keep high expectations," she continues. "If he isn't able in the moment, I don't push him, give him a break, and gently help him bring his efforts back to the challenge. The people who work well with him are safe, non-threatening, treat him as an equal, allow him choice, and, most importantly, believe in him. In school and especially after public education ends, I had to advocate strongly for my child. I learned to be efficient and politely aggressive." At 19, Dylan entered the adult vocational rehabilitation (VR) system and for two years worked unsuccessfully in traditional jobs, which did not fit his skills. "Things have to be customized for the person. He loves art, dance, talking, marketing himself - these are the things we began focusing on.

In 2004, Dylan and Terri asked the VR counselor if self-employment was an option and were initially told yes, if it was a viable plan. VR hired a business consultant and after a lengthy assessment decided not to support Dylan's business plan.

Terri was not deterred and challenged the VR decision. The family discussed Dylan's business around the dinner table. She went to classes and found agencies and people with experience who enthusiastically supported the idea. She was willing to travel, expand her own network, and got help. She approached everyone she met with questions and raw passion. She wrote a business plan, which included all the things that work for Dylan. At the Ellensburg Employment Conference ( [www.theinitiative.ws](http://www.theinitiative.ws) ), she connected with several families who had successfully started businesses with their adult sons and daughters.



Dylan practices his meditation in a relaxing outdoor setting. His poem Sunset (see below) says it best. Photo courtesy of Sifu, Brian Brinkman.

She called everyone she could, from supervisors to division directors to legislators. She wrote and rewrote the business plan, went to the Small Business Administration and met a Service Corps of Retired Executives (SCORE) counselor who gave valuable input and encouragement. She worked with a newly assigned VR business consultant on financial projections and details, and eventually, VR did invest. A business license was bought, she set up a ledger, bank account, and recordkeeping system, and VR printed a series of 12 art cards and hired a Web site developer to build the first DK Arts Web site.

“Dylan's business is a customized job put into action. He loves the money, but profit goes beyond what he puts in his pocket. True benefit comes when he hears of others who are encouraged by Dylan to reach for their dreams and celebrate their abilities.”

It is important to have someone manage the business, keep the big picture in view, and be able to market the skills and talents of the business owner. “Marketing is crucial to the ongoing success of a business,” Terri says.

DK Arts quickly evolved. Primarily at disability-related venues, they learned to set up a booth to show Dylan's work, and his products expanded beyond art cards to bookmarks, postcards, prints,

and calendars. Dylan showed that he is not only a talented artist, but also a skilled marketer able to draw people in and sell his work. He was invited to speak at events, and loved it, as did the audiences. He had discovered yet another talent – motivational speaking. They put together a PowerPoint presentation and have revised it over time, adding performance, karate, and dance. He also started a dance troupe called “The Heavenly Dance Company” that has performed across the state.

“He has a unique and powerful voice, loves being a star, and, quite frankly, deserves it,” Terri says. “He is funny, cracks jokes, can ad-lib, and enjoys marketing himself. Dylan has successfully branded himself as an artist, performer, and motivational speaker. Yes, he does have Down syndrome, but Dylan is proud and ready to present himself to the non-disabled business world. We are not yet sure how to make this happen.”

Since 2004 Dylan has spoken at over 20 conferences throughout the United States, including six national conferences, one event in Vancouver BC, and will travel in 2010 to Ireland for the 10th International World Down Syndrome Convention. He has performed at numerous churches, nonprofits, schools, transition fairs, and other events. He was a semi-finalist in an international poetry contest of the International Poets Society. His poem, “Faces,” was published in a compilation book and recorded on a CD box set. He also won second place in an international watercolor competition of Arts Ability for “Colored Hills.” He was featured on a PBS series, “Biz Kids,” a series teaching financial literacy to school-aged children through skits and profiles. He was featured in Logan Magazine, ([www.loganmagazine.com](http://www.loganmagazine.com)), a style magazine for young people with disabilities started by a young woman with a disability in Spokane, WA. Through word-of-mouth, Dylan was referred to a documentary filmmaker and is now featured in the movie ARTS: Possibilities, Disabilities, and the Arts by <http://www.normalfilms.com/>. He has also been written about in the local newspaper and is featured on Washington State’s Supported Employment storytelling Web page, [www.peopleworking.wikispaces.com](http://www.peopleworking.wikispaces.com). Most recently, both Dylan and Terri traveled to Italy with a group of friends and artists with disabilities for a once in a lifetime art experience.

Dylan’s skill and talent are the fuel of DK Arts, but it is Terri’s constant support and advocacy behind the scenes, which make it all happen.

“What I like most about his career is that he lifts his head, explores, and is not slowing down. He is a visionary. His business is a place for his skills and talents to shine, be witnessed, and appreciated.”

“His current art teacher is watching Dylan become the real choreographer of his art. She called me after the Italy trip and excitedly said, “He is drawing from the right side of his brain!’ I am so proud of his accomplishments.” He is now working on his “Italy Series” of miniature pastels using a magnifying glass. He goes deep, is entirely focused, and his art and life are evolving.

He is also working on starting a children’s music band to inspire people, and a video game named, The Slayers.

“It is a journey,” Terri says. “It is always about what’s next...”

Dylan adds: “I want to send a message to the parents by telling them to tell their kids not to be afraid to show their abilities. Show the public—the world—what they can do, and most importantly, show the world how important they are. I want them to feel what I’m feeling. It’s time for them to shine, because they are the future generation. My message is simple. It’s about Abilities not disabilities.”

To learn more about Dylan, his business, and his art, visit [www.dylankarts.com](http://www.dylankarts.com).

## Sunset

*By Dylan Kuehl*

I like wearing flashy colored clothes  
so I blend with the sunset  
The color of my clothes helps me find peace inside  
It also means I'm part of the sunset  
When I'm meditating  
it feels like the colors of the sunset  
are flowing thru me  
It's like having a connection of meditation  
It makes perfect sense of connection  
Sometimes I have anger management  
When I look at the picture I feel calm  
smelling the sweet air with a cool breeze  
What an amazement the sight of a sunset would be  
It makes feel like that I'm included to the world

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*Jim Corey is a Senior Program Manager for the Washington Initiative for Supported Employment in Seattle, Washington, [www.theinitiative.ws](http://www.theinitiative.ws). He has for over 15 years served people with developmental disabilities, their families, support providers, and communities within Washington State. He is currently a statewide trainer, technical assistance provider, and innovative projects manager specializing in person-centered planning techniques, supported employment, and self-employment. He is also a studio painter, writer, and Italy aficionado.*

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