



Villa student Daniel celebrates his poetry "Super Power" with Occupational Therapist Rebekka.

The Power of Poetry: Daniel Finds His Voice at Villa School

Articles by Katherine Evans, Villa Esperanza Services Grant Writer

Villa School student Daniel arrives for his occupational therapy session ready to put his thoughts to paper. Before he's even taken off his shoes—customary for all students entering the Occupational Therapy Clinic—he exclaims, "Let's write!" Since January 2018, Daniel has been publishing his very own poetry blog with assistance from Occupational Therapist Rebekka Manzella.

"I really saw his desire to communicate and talk about his interests," Rebekka explains. "I wanted to expand on that and use his poetry blog as a means of learning computer skills, vocational skills, and also work on his ability to have a conversation." Though Daniel is verbal, the poetry blog project also presents a rich opportunity for him to express his feelings and thoughts, and hone his



Daniel is happy to get started on his next poem!

writing skills. What's more, Daniel's family and friends can use the poetry blog to connect with Daniel about his favorite topics, such as music, animals, and Thomas the Tank Engine.

Once Daniel takes his seat at the computer, the writing process begins. After trying to decide his subject matter—holidays in April or a prompt from a writing booklet—Daniel settles on another subject entirely: composers. Music, especially the work of Mozart and Bach, is a passion of Daniel's and great inspiration for his poems. To get started, he types "composers" in the Google search bar and scans the results. Bach emerges as the muse of the day.

"What can you tell me about Bach?" Rebekka asks.

Daniel performs another search and pulls up Bach's Wikipedia page. "Baroque is a kind of music," he says, his fingers flying on the keyboard as the poem begins to take shape. Daniel searches for an image of Bach to accompany his poem, saves the image to his poetry folder, and posts the image on his blog for a finishing touch. He asks if he can listen to a Bach song in the final minutes of his session. After conducting a quick YouTube search, Daniel selects Bach's Brandenburg Concerto No. 1 in F Major, and music fills the room.

"Should we dance?" Rebekka asks.

"Yes," says Daniel, rising from his chair. "Dance!"

Daniel is confident, proud, and eager to connect with others, but before he joined Villa in 2012, he struggled with behavioral challenges that impeded his progress. "The last two schools he'd been to were really just warehousing him," Daniel's father Jeff Rosenfield explains. "I think his self-esteem had just gone down the tubes. Villa was the first place in a long time where people really dedicated themselves to understanding him and making him feel understood."

In addition to making sure Daniel feels valued, Villa's staff also provides a comprehensive curriculum that includes valuable speech, occupational, and music therapies. Daniel's mother Norma Velvikis reflects, "He needed a place that was more nurturing, with people who were really tuned in to him. He also needed behavioral therapy, occupational therapy, and speech and language therapy much more intensely than he was getting before." Behavioral staff have helped Daniel develop coping strategies for his sensory needs. When his classroom environment is too noisy, Daniel knows to ask for quiet time in the breakroom or a trip to his classroom's calming retreat garden.

As Daniel prepares to celebrate his 21st birthday, he is working with Villa staff on building transitional skills. Whether taking a field trip with his classmates to the local Vons to speak with a store manager, or manning the register at the Villa School's campus store, Daniel is practicing vocational skills to maximize his independence.

Daniel's father Jeff is hopeful for the future. "My son has spent a third of his life at Villa, and I hope he spends as much of his life as he can within Villa's reach," Jeff shares. "For me what it's meant is that the incredible pressure you feel as a parent from the moment you wake up to the moment you fall asleep is dialed back. I know that during those hours he's at Villa, he's happy and thriving."

Mom Norma echoes these sentiments, reflecting, "I hope for Daniel that the people that are around him for the rest of his life treat him the way staff at Villa have treated him—with kindness, love, and compassion."

Villa's Annual Sports Day!



Villa students had a great time at Villa School's Annual Sports Day event! Students cheered and competed in four events.

A Standing Ovation for Barnhart School!

What do a rooster, cat, dog, mouse, and singing cockroach have in common? They're all characters in Barnhart School's musical rendition of *Martina y Pérez*, a traditional Latin American tale that details the romance between Martina the cockroach and Pérez, the mouse who's smitten with her.

Barnhart's 4th grade class has been rehearsing this bilingual performance for their Villa School friends for many months, and today they've arrived on Villa's campus to debut the finished product. The excitement in the air is palpable. Chairs squeak. Villa students ooh and ahh at the colorful props. The play's pint-sized star—Martina the cockroach—makes her entrance, antennae bobbing. The chorus of Barnhart students intones: "Bienvenidos todos, welcome to you all!"



Barnhart students smile for the camera after a fantastic performance of *Martina y Pérez*.

This is Barnhart's second annual performance at Villa School. Barnhart 4th grade teachers Natalie Yoder and Kyle Kever wanted to put on a play that would resonate with Villa's kids and take into account their unique sensory needs. Mr. Kever explains, "The ultimate goal of starting this partnership was to make our students more empathetic towards people in their community with different learning needs than their own."

When the play concludes, it's evident that Barnhart's preparation has paid off. Villa's students stand and clap, and several line up to high five the Barnhart performers. In addition to the play, there's another treat in store: Barnhart stays for recess and passes out Star Wars, Pokémon, and princess stickers to their new Villa buddies. Barnhart and Villa kids climb aboard the playground equipment, and take turns spinning, jumping, and swinging.

After recess, goodbyes are exchanged. One Villa student has a shy smile on his face. "The play was good," he says. "I like my stickers." Another reaches for a high five.

The Barnhart performers shuffle inside for a post-performance discussion.

"Who had fun?" Ms. Yoder asks her students.

All hands shoot up.

One little boy comments breathlessly, "When the audience was coming in the door I was so excited! I just wanted to know them!"

His classmate agrees. "They expressed themselves in different ways than us," she observes. "That was really cool."

Villa School relies on partnerships like these so that students have a chance to learn, play, and grow with their neurotypical peers. Barnhart and other community schools, including Loyola High School, Mayfield Junior School, Mayfield Senior School, St. Francis High School, Tarbut V'Torah Community Day School, and Westridge School have been instrumental in forging an inclusive, welcoming environment on Villa's campus. Many visiting students from partnering schools form lifelong bonds with Villa, and return to campus years later to complete internships or volunteer projects.

Barnhart hopes to return for more frequent visits in the future. Mr. Kever reflects, "We just love the students and staff of Villa Esperanza. They opened doors to our students and allowed them to have an incredible experience."

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