

EMMA'S ART TALKS FOR HER

“I don’t like talking about myself much,” says Emma Sandlin. It may be difficult to believe that the gregarious 23-year-old was nonverbal as a child, but she still prefers to speak through her art.

“I mainly like doing anime-type or anime-adjacent art,” she says. Some of the figures she draws are based on characters developed for the role-playing game *Dungeons & Dragons*. Working more with digital art than hand-drawing, Sandlin is hoping to turn her creations into stickers she can market. She also wants to get back into embroidery, something she dabbled in when she was younger.

One of her college professors told Emma she could take her sketches to Santa Fe to sell and come back with a new car. Being a perfectionist, she doesn’t see that happening yet. But the New Mexico Division of Vocational Rehabilitation is working with the Springer resident to build a self-employment plan so she can make a career of her art.



“I don’t think into the future too much. I want to start my little business and get that off the ground,” she says. She’ll soon be meeting with a business planner arranged by NMDVR. “It’s about figuring out funds, how to build a start-up, get myself out there at first. Then we’ll get more into getting the equipment and where I’m going to place said equipment.”



Sandlin graduated at the top of her high school class and is a member of the Phi Kappa Phi collegiate honor society. She graduated *summa cum laude* with a bachelor’s degree in fine arts with an emphasis in visual arts from Eastern New Mexico University in Portales, and a minor in history, focusing on World War I & II naval history. She also holds an associate degree in general studies. NMDVR helped pay for Emma’s college textbooks and fees.

“College was pretty fun. I didn’t go out a lot, like most college students do, but I did make a few friends,” Sandlin recalls, adding that she also became more independent. “I learned digital editing and digital illustration, and how to brand myself—how to make business cards, how to make a website, and be able to promote myself to become successful.”

According to her mother Janette, Emma was the first student officially diagnosed with autism in her school, and she was low functioning. Through therapy, a lot of effort, and self-motivation, “she has come a long way,” Janette says. “She has learned to be more patient with people and more structured in her day, which helps her.”

Listening to her mother recount those difficult early school days, Emma says, “Most of that I don’t remember. It’s interesting hearing how much hard work was put into me.” Emma credits her older sister Chloe, among others, with helping her through her journey. “Thinking of the different outcomes, if they hadn’t pushed as hard, where would I be? Would I be cooped up and silent all the time? Would I be low functioning for the rest of my life?”

The Sandlins originally reached out to NMDVR because “the route we took when she was little and got her first diagnosis was to try any and every program possible,” Janette says. “It’s a great resource. I’m surprised more people don’t know about DVR.”

For information about NMDVR programs, contact your nearest office. There are two dozen locations across the state: dvr.state.nm.us/locations/.

The New Mexico Division of Vocational Rehabilitation helps eligible individuals with documented disabilities find suitable employment. Vocational rehabilitation is a voluntary program supporting people who want to work. With a long history of success and proven methodology for making the best fits, NMDVR is committed to helping participants thrive in their communities. For more information, visit dvr.state.nm.us or call 505-954-8500.

The Vocational Rehabilitation program receives 78.7% of its funding through a grant from the U.S. Department of Education. For federal fiscal year 2023, the total funds awarded is \$22,066,600. The remaining 21.3% is funded by state appropriations and transfers from the Commission for the Blind and Commission for the Deaf and Hard of Hearing.

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Zephyr and Inriah Zul (2022), by Emma Sandlin