

A Stupid Brilliance

Photography major captures dyslexia

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By: Becky St. Clair

“One out of five people has a learning disability. I didn’t know that. I thought I was the only one and I felt so isolated.”

Heather Briggs, senior [photography major](#), struggled with words.

“In first grade you were expected to read, and the teacher made me read in front of everybody,” she recalls. “That was terrifying. I would stutter, I couldn’t get the words right and I always felt like people were laughing at me.”

Briggs began home schooling in second grade, but she still struggled linguistically. She regularly flipped letters and within words the letters became jumbled and confusing. She specifically remembers that the letter F was particularly challenging, as she couldn’t remember which direction it should be written. Words like “echo” and “family” were also memorably difficult.

“Through all of this, art was really what gave me confidence and helped me find my identity,” she says. “My identity wasn’t in the lack; it was in my gift.”

At age ten, Briggs was assessed with severe [dyslexia](#). Though her scores were low in linguistics and writing, they were off the charts when it came to visual and spatial comprehension. In response, her parents enrolled her in art classes. Briggs came alive.

“I couldn’t have made it this far without my mom,” Briggs admits. “She walked and struggled beside me every step of the way. My parents were the ones who saw my potential and did everything they could to build on it. There’s no way I can ever thank them enough for all they’ve done.”

It was during her time at [Kalamazoo Institute of Arts](#) (KIA) that she came to fully realize how she could use her heightened awareness of visual and spatial concepts to overcome her linguistic struggles.

“All my life I felt the system was rigged against me,” she recalls. “I had to make it work for me, and through art I was able to do that.”

While at KIA, Briggs began to explore photography, something that had always appealed to her. She went back to basics and started with film.

“I did a lot of work in the dark room, which kind of inspired a feel of black and white film-esque vibes,” she says.

This experience carried over into her senior thesis project at Andrews, a photography exhibit called “A Stupid Brilliance.” The show featured a collection of black and white images representing her struggle with, journey through and mastery over dyslexia.

“When I started this project I had to determine what the visual language was that I wanted to use to portray all of these concepts that are very abstract,” says Briggs. “You can’t see dyslexia. You can’t see the frustration. You can’t see the anger or the fear or the insecurity. That was the hardest part.”

Initially she wanted her images to have a dream-like, abstract feel. Her original plan was to shoot photos and then heavily manipulate the images in Photoshop, using a clouds and sky background for each. But it didn’t feel right.

“I needed to use my hands to do this project,” she says. “That’s when I hit upon physically creating the scenes and then photographing them. It was much more genuine and real.”

In the end Briggs forced herself to let go of the dreamscape clouds and sky, moving toward a black and white cardboard box theme. To illustrate the abstract concepts with which she was working, Briggs made her negative concept images jagged, off-center or floating. The positive images were more centered and balanced.

Every element in the images was intentional. For example, one image of an apple with pencils stabbing into it represents school. On another wall, an apple with the shape of a house carved into the skin represents homeschool. The first image of the collection contains an upside-down mask with “stupid” written on its forehead and the final image is a right-side-up mask that says “brilliant.”

“I like the juxtaposition of the positive and negative,” she says. “There are a lot of opposing images that show how I started—feeling stupid—and where I’m at now—where God has shown me that I have a gifting that I can be brilliant in.”

Briggs is very happy with the result of her project. Though she knew she had a strong concept from the beginning because it was her story, it was a challenge to work out the details of the visual representation of the story.

“So many people have come to me after viewing my exhibit and told me their own stories of struggles with dyslexia or other learning disabilities,” she says. “This is what I wanted more than anything. I wanted to show them that they could talk about it, and it’s not something to be ashamed of. You don’t have to hide it. For a long time, I tried to hide my struggles because I was afraid of how people would judge me. I’m so thankful I found my identity in art.”

Briggs would like to take her show to various schools and galleries, sharing her story of struggle and triumph with as many people as possible. She wants her work to inspire others to keep working hard to overcome difficulties and realize they are valuable and are not defined by their struggles.

“No one is stupid,” she says emphatically. “Every person has their own set of brilliance, and they can be brilliant in their giftings, they just have to realize and acknowledge it. God’s gift to me was art, and I am so blessed to have received it.”

Related Links:

- [Interested in a degree in photography?](#)
- [Department of Visual Art, Communication & Design](#)
- [What is dyslexia?](#)
- [Kalamazoo Institute of Arts](#)

Contact:

PR

pr@andrews.edu

269-471-3322