

my story

Tabitha

Tabitha, 17, has severe autism and is a blossoming artist. My Story usually features a young person in care telling their story in their own words. Because of her autism, Tabitha isn't able to tell Who Cares? about her experiences. Instead, we spoke to Chris, Tabitha's foster carer, about her amazing story.

We first looked after Tabitha when she was five. Tabitha didn't come into care because of her disability, she came to us because she was placed in school in Norwich and her mum lives on the coast. The distance was too far for a five-year-old to travel.

Unfortunately, Tabitha's mum became quite ill and what started as a short term solution turned into a long term placement. The great thing is that we have a very good relationship with Tabitha's mother.

Communication is something that we have awful problems with. Tabitha does understand what we're saying, but she doesn't always understand why we might be saying it.

As she's become a teenager things have become more difficult. She can be quite rebellious.

The really terrible thing is that because of her autism she doesn't have any friends. She doesn't really have any relationships at all. She definitely prefers her own company and she hates being touched.

I think it's possible that Tabitha is trying to communicate through her art.

Tabitha's pictures really started to get noticed when her art was put on display at an Education Matters conference in Norfolk about five years ago.

Flourish – an organisation that promotes art by looked after children and that has really helped Tabitha – got in touch with the Education Matters team. They were looking for art by children in care and Tabitha's pictures were put forward.

This is what led to Tabitha's first ever exhibition. It took place in 2006 in Brighton.

I was very concerned about exploiting Tabitha. We got permission to exhibit from Tabitha's mum but Tabitha obviously can't tell us how she feels about it.

So it was a massive relief when we took Tabitha down to Brighton, for the first exhibition. You could see she was really proud to have her pictures in a gallery.

Her work was the first thing you saw as you came into the gallery. Tabitha just went up to the pictures and held her hands up to them – she seemed so happy.

At the most recent exhibition, at the Assembly Rooms in Norwich, loads of her pictures were on display. On the day of the opening, Tabitha had been quite pre-menstrual, so I was worried about her and how she was going to cope with all the people. But when she saw all her pictures it was amazing. She seemed really calm, really oblivious to anyone else.

Perhaps even more amazing has been the reaction of other people. It has been overwhelming. Everybody who has seen Tabitha's art has said how wonderful and unique it is.

You can lose yourself in her pictures. Each time you look at them you see something new.

We never expected to sell any pictures, but we have actually sold quite a few. The chief executive of CAFCASS bought one that is now hanging at their headquarters.

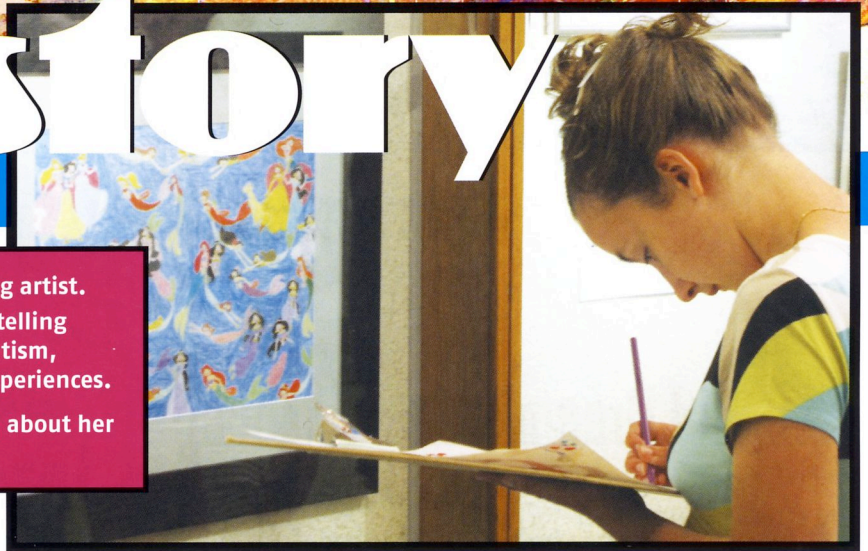
At the Assembly Rooms in Norwich there was a lot of interest. The Lord Mayor was absolutely in awe of the pictures. He said that he wanted to buy a picture to donate to the City.

So, when the Lord Mayor leaves in May 2008, he will present Tabitha's picture to the City of Norwich. The picture will then hang in the Lord Mayor's Chambers. It's incredible.

It was just after this that the Lady Mayoress approached wanting to buy a picture for her own personal collection.

It's been incredible to see Tabitha develop in this way. The most amazing thing is that she couldn't care less about the success, about whether she sells pictures or not. To her, art is just something she does for herself. It's her sanctuary and it makes her happy. For us, the bonus is that it makes other people happy too.

For more information about Flourish, please go to www.flourish-art.org



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