Shelle House (00:09):

Thank you for listening to the Arts in Arkansas spotlights podcast, celebrating educators and students of dance, music, theater, and visual art from all corners of our state. Hear from new artists each month as they share their unique fine arts experiences in Arkansas schools.

Shelle House (00:25):

I'm here with Elizabeth Spillman. Elizabeth has a very interesting job, one that is unique to the state of Arkansas. She is the visual art teacher for the Arkansas School for the Blind and Visually Impaired. Hello Elizabeth, how are you?

Elizabeth Spilman (00:40):

I'm doing well, how about you today?

Shelle House (00:42):

I am very good. Thank you for being here. So apart from your role as an educator, what is your experience in the arts? Have you always been an artist?

Elizabeth Spilman (00:54):

No, I have not. My elementary school where I grew up in Alabama actually didn't even have art class. I didn't learn anything about the arts until I went to college.

Elizabeth Spilman (01:03):

I really didn't start drawing until middle school. I would get bored in classes and I would just start doodling, and I'd look at pictures or posters and just draw things on the posters. And I got interested in that and [started out in color 00:01:14] and just was self-taught.

Shelle House (01:16):

I think that's how lots of young artists begin. An important thing that I want my students to know is that you don't have to be this phenomenal savant artist to begin with, all you have to do is put something out there. It can be putting crayon on paper. It can be sculpting clay. It can be anything. You don't have to be a professional artist to be an artist.

Shelle House (01:41):

Please walk me through your journey as an educator. How did you get to where you are now in the field of education?

Elizabeth Spilman (01:49):

Well, I started off at the University of North Alabama in Florence, Alabama, and I got my bachelor's of art degree there. I had to move to Starkville, Mississippi to Mississippi State, to finish my education degree. When I got through there, my first teaching job was in Clarksdale, Mississippi at a seven through 12th grade art position. I met my future spouse while there, he lived in Little Rock.

Elizabeth Spilman (02:11):

Later, when we decided to get married, I moved to Little Rock because there was more job opportunities here. A job opened up at the school for the deaf, that was actually a residential advisor, and I tried to apply for that. And they had an art teacher opening. So they called me the next day and it was like, "There's an art teacher job opening. We need you, please apply."

Elizabeth Spilman (02:29):

And so I applied and I got called in for an interview the next day. And then three days later got hired, stayed there for three years and job situation changed. I moved to a town called Morville. I taught K through 12 art there, I stayed there for a little over two years, decided I needed a change. And I worked at a daycare for a while until another job opportunity opened up.

Elizabeth Spilman (02:49):

I applied for a job at the school for the blind, which is another residential advisor, because I didn't see an art teacher job posted. They actually hadn't posted it yet. So they call me the next day and say, "We have an art teacher job opening. Can you please apply?" And so the next day I got called in and a few days later got hired, and I've been here... This will be my third year here.

Shelle House (03:08):

You have such a wide experience then, you've taught from pre-K all the way to 12th grade. You've taught specifically in the arts and you've taught in just childhood development.

Shelle House (03:19):

I think one question that anyone listening would want to know is with that wide experience, how is it different teaching at the School for the Blind and Visually Impaired than it has been teaching in a traditional environment with open public enrollment?

Elizabeth Spilman (03:35):

I really don't find much difference in it as I don't really see differences in kids. The biggest change I would have to say would be in public school I did a lot more drawing demonstrations than I do here. I still do drawing when I do drawing, especially with someone who's completely blind, I will do... I will ask the student what they want and then I will research it, find it, and I will hot glue the image down or use puffy paint to outline it. And then that student has to decorate said image. So that that way it's their idea, their project.

Elizabeth Spilman (04:10):

Even in public schools I was doing a lot of tactile stuff. I loved making three-dimensional things, building stuff, putting stuff together, using paper, construction paper. So about the only really big change I can say I've seen is just not doing as many drawing demos.

Shelle House (04:24):

Right. So I had the privilege of visiting with Elizabeth and being in her classroom for just three class periods. I got to see three classes go through very different things with her, and what I noticed in all of that was all of the artwork is three-dimensional, even if it's traditionally two dimensional artwork.

Shelle House (04:45):

So Ms. Spillman did a project with 3D lines. So whereas a visual art teacher in a traditional environment with mostly sighted students is going to do a project where they draw different styles of lines, Elizabeth's students instead used corrugated cardboard or construction paper. And they built those lines in three-dimensional fashion. This year, they made cards or pop-up books that had three dimensional elements that pop out of the page whenever they open the book or the card.

Shelle House (05:18):

So that 3D element is ingrained into everything that they are doing because they can of course produce and feel that without having to see it perfectly. So Ms. Spillman, the school is called the Arkansas School for the Blind and Visually Impaired. I think a lot of people avoid talking about disability or differences in perception because they're not exactly sure how to, could you explain to us the difference between blind and visually impaired? And why those two distinctions are there?

Elizabeth Spilman (05:49):

Visually impaired means there's something there that's causing to not see as well. Both the visual impairment and the blind is depending on what caused it. There's a trauma, there is a virus or genetics, and depending on the severity of each of those three things, it also depends on the severity of the visual impairment or the blindness.

Elizabeth Spilman (06:13):

So we have visual impairment where there's kids that are completely colorblind, or there's visual impairment where they have Nystagmus, where their eyes move back and forth.

Elizabeth Spilman (06:24):

And then we also have complete total blindness where there was something happened either during childbirth or genetics or trauma, where they completely lost their sight, either at birth or later in life.

Shelle House (06:36):

How would a sighted person respectfully interact with someone with reduced or no vision? What would be a proper way to help someone who needs help? How would you know if someone needs help?

Elizabeth Spilman (06:52):

That's a good question, because either even visually impaired or and or blind individuals don't want you to just come up and grab them. They really don't like that. They want to be treated as a person. They first need to know you're there, because if you does go up to him and say, "Hey, can I help you?" They're not going to know who you are. They're going to think you're a complete total stranger, and then they may try and fight you off.

Elizabeth Spilman (07:17):

So the first thing you can do is just walk up to said person, introduce yourself, say, "Hello, my name is such and such. I see that you're at a crosswalk. Do you mind if I help you walking across?"

Elizabeth Spilman (07:31):

And if they say no, be respectful and say, "Okay, thank you. Have a nice day." And if they say yes, the polite way of guiding them across is either hand on elbow or they can also grasp your shoulder.

Shelle House (07:45):

Thank you. I think just that piece of information is so useful for people who have never had that exposure. It's not scary to talk to someone who's different as long as you know how to do that.

Shelle House (07:59):

I myself have reduced vision. I had neurosurgery a few years ago, and as a result of the condition that required the surgery, I have optic nerve atrophy. So I do not have peripheral vision. And if somebody walks up beside me, I do not know they're there. So I really appreciate when someone draws attention to themselves in the way that you just described.

Shelle House (08:22):

Now, I only have mildly reduced vision. It doesn't impact my life in any significant way, but I can identify with what you said. It is really handy to know someone is there when you have no other way of knowing that they're there.

Shelle House (08:37):

I'm terrible in restaurants. If the waiter walks up and stands beside me, I do not know that the waiter's there. I appreciate that awareness of individuals with differences.

Shelle House (08:49):

In observing your class today, I got to see you do a demonstration of a pottery wheel. So that's called throwing. Throwing is the visual art jargon term, the technical term for creating a symmetrical piece of ceramics on a moving wheel. And what I noticed in your demonstration was that you talked out everything you did. Every time you moved your hands, you described how your hands were moving, how they interacted with each other, and you would stop frequently not to say, "Hey, get a closer look," but to say, "Touch what I've just done," so that your students who cannot see what you've done were able to interact with it in a tactile fashion.

Shelle House (09:34):

And I really don't think that that's a whole lot different than what teachers of sighted students do. It's just a slightly different approach. Another thing that I got to witness was one of your students drawing on a texture board. Could you explain what this texture board is and how your students use it?

Elizabeth Spilman (09:55):

Okay, so a texture board, and it may not even be called that, is a easy thing to put together. It's a window screen that is mounted on either plywood or board or cardboard and then taped down or framed down in some fashion, that the students put a piece of paper on top of, just regular drawing paper, and then they can use crayons to capture the wax of that crayon. It raises it up so they can feel what they're drawing. So that you draw a square, they know what a square looks like. You draw a triangle, they know

what a triangle looks like, and so forth. And then the student can learn to draw from there and get feedback.

Shelle House (10:33):

One of your students drew a car for me, and I love it. I will put a picture of this car up in the show notes of this episode so that folks can see what he drew. This student, he... Is he completely blind?

Elizabeth Spilman (10:49):

Yes, he is.

Shelle House (10:50):

Okay. You would not know it to look at this drawing. This student created a gorgeous drawing of a car completely by feeling the wax on that texture board, which was incredible. I could see that being an excellent exercise for any student, regardless of their vision, to see how that visual art can translate into a really tactile experience for anyone, not just for students with reduced or no vision.

Shelle House (11:22):

So my next question for you, the Arkansas School for the Blind and Visually Impaired is partially residential, and then many students also live in the area and drive in, or their parents drive them in of course.

Shelle House (11:36):

But when COVID caused so many shutdowns, of course the school had to shut down as well and it went completely virtual. How did that impact teaching and learning in your class?

Elizabeth Spilman (11:49):

The very first quarantine I was told to email and or call parents every other day to ask them how their students were doing and to suggest projects for them. And I also went a little bit above and beyond that, I created my own YouTube videos of myself making something at home of different projects that I would want my kids to make in the future. I created a yarn paint [inaudible 00:12:16], where I poured different colors paint cups and put yarn in there, and then I put it on a canvas and then I would explain what I was doing to the kids.

Elizabeth Spilman (12:23):

And then I would pull it off and show them what had happened. And then I would explain what happened. And another project I remember doing was creating a Chinese lantern out of melted crayons on wax paper. And I went step-by-step, explaining what I was doing in case somebody wanted to follow along.

Elizabeth Spilman (12:40):

And now with this last year, when we came back, had several classes that had some virtual kids along with my in-person kids. So the way I handled that was we still did the same projects, everybody did the same projects. I first sent home supplies. And if I did a project where they needed supplies, I would find out if they needed help getting those supplies or if they could get them theirselves.

Elizabeth Spilman (13:06):

And if they needed help, I would figure out a way to get them to them somehow so that we were doing as much normalcy as we could and so that every child could participate in the project.

Shelle House (13:18):

Research has shown that students that are hearing their own teacher's voice in a video or in some sort of instructional media, they are way more likely to actually complete the project and to understand the instructions.

Shelle House (13:32):

So taking on that personal role and making that your own with your voice and your demonstration, I think probably was a very, very great thing for your kids, especially in a time of such crisis and isolation.

Shelle House (13:46):

Speaking of crisis, the world right now, it's in an interesting place. There's a lot of difficult formative moments happening. How do you think the arts, visual arts specifically, but the arts in general, can help students cope with the state of the world?

Elizabeth Spilman (14:06):

I think just letting them be themselves, be kids, would help a great deal, even if they have to have a mask on and be separate about it, just doing something normal brings them out of that state of we're never going to get out of this. So doing something as normally as you can helps that out a great deal. And I just think making things takes their minds off of it, because if they're making something then they're down there making things. They're not talking about mass. They're not talking about COVID. They're not talking about everything else. They're focused on what they are making, and they're interested in that.

Elizabeth Spilman (14:37):

So I think just keeping them focused on normalcy and doing things that they love to do will help that.

Shelle House (14:45):

So that normalcy aspect is something that I want to talk about, because you know of course that teaching is a big job. There are lots and lots of things to think about. Teachers, a lot of secondary teachers have 150 students. We have paperwork to fill out and attendance to take, and we have commitments to make, it's a big job.

Shelle House (15:05):

And sometimes that means that we either give too much or too little attention to things that either matter or don't. And what I mean by that is all of your students have some difference in perceptual ability, whether they're blind or they have low vision, reduced vision, any form of visual impairment.

Shelle House (15:24):

Other teachers don't necessarily have that issue, but they may have one student with drastically reduced vision. And that one student is still capable of doing everything that their peers are doing, even with modifications. I think expectations are an important thing to draw attention to. What would be your advice to another educator in keeping high expectations for students with different abilities?

Elizabeth Spilman (15:51):

With all my students, I tell them that you have to try your best. You have to think outside the box and you can't rush things. I tell them the first day, this is what I'm looking for. When I talk about grading and my expectations, neatness counts. And they always ask me, "How am I supposed to make it neat?" And I say, I'll tell them, "If you're not rushing it and you're taking your time, then I know it's neat."

Elizabeth Spilman (16:17):

For those teachers who may just have one student who's blind and are visually impaired, it doesn't matter. They are still there. They can still do the project with them. You may have to figure out a different way for them to do it, but there's ways to do it. And there's ways to let them participate, which is important. They want to feel as part of the class, they want to feel as part of the group, they don't want to feel pushed aside.

Elizabeth Spilman (16:38):

They want to try. They can try, you just have to let them try. And even if they have an aid with them, see what that student can do by themselves without the aid, and let them do as much as they can by themselves.

Shelle House (16:53):

I would agree with that. Is there a specific incident or story that you could tell us about related to keeping high expectations and allowing students their chance to shine and participate?

Elizabeth Spilman (17:06):

My second grade teacher was one who inspired me to be a teacher. She was very helpful in that she didn't let you quit. She always inspired you to do your best.

Elizabeth Spilman (17:14):

My biggest thing with teaching and education and the way I teach came from an observation I did later in college. One of my assignments was to observe a classroom, doing an assignment. And then later during the same class, teach a lesson.

Elizabeth Spilman (17:31):

I observed this one teacher doing a lesson. I believe it was a ceramics lesson, but there was a student there who had a mental disability. And it was 11th graders. And this [inaudible 00:17:45] wasn't allowed to participate, he just sat there. And I just sat there thinking that this is wrong, that he needs to participate. He can try, what they're doing isn't dangerous. He could have tried.

Elizabeth Spilman (17:58):

When I presented my lesson, I did the simple, easy lesson, which was making a picture of using nothing but sand and glue. And I said, "Everybody can do this."

Elizabeth Spilman (18:08):

And this one student who was there that day just literally shot out of his desk and almost ran to the supplies. He was that desperate to try something. He wanted to do it. He was this big 11th grader and he just literally almost shot across the room.

Elizabeth Spilman (18:26):

He kept asking to do more. Every time he finished his work, "Can I do another one? Can I do another one?" I think he got at least five or six projects done because he was that desperate just to try. It doesn't matter what disability or ability your student has, they want to try. They want to try, and they want to be creative.

Shelle House (18:51):

Yeah, I think that's even true of students who have no disability, who then argue with us, who say, "But I can't draw. I don't know how to draw." I think that's true of those people as well. They do want to try, they just need that encouragement and that push instead of collapsing to their argument, push back. Push back, make them try.

Elizabeth Spilman (19:14):

And another story that goes along with this same one, I was observing a different art teacher at a different school. And this teacher had a child with autism. He showed me one of his artworks and it was just astounding. This kid drew a closeup of a tree with a diff... Like a fall background behind it. I can still remember it was the most beautiful picture I've ever seen. And he let everybody in there try, no matter who they were. I was like, "That's what I want to do," and that's what I've always wanted to do.

Shelle House (19:46):

And that's exactly what you're doing. I know I only got to see three classes today, but every single student in all three of those classes was very involved and they were creating things that were incredible. So for those of you who didn't have the honor of seeing the classes today, the first class did stone carving and woodcarving this morning. Stone carving and woodcarving. It was incredible. The second one, of course, like I mentioned, we're throwing pottery on a pottery wheel.

Shelle House (20:16):

And the third class was working on either drawing or creating sculptures out of styrofoam cups. It was unbelievable, and every student was so fully engaged and achieving at such high levels because Elizabeth has those high expectations and has that inclusive mindset of pushing every kid to their fullest talent, their fullest expression of ability. I loved it.

Shelle House (20:43):

I would love to come hang out with you every single day. It was great. Also I would love a chance to carve my own wood and my own soapstone and to throw my own bowl. It would be great. But I've really loved getting to know you and your students today.

Shelle House (20:58):

So as we wrap up, is there anything that you would like to add?

Elizabeth Spilman (21:04):

Just let your kids be themselves, let them be their own creative selves, let them have their own imagination. Even if they can't visually see or have visual impairments, they can see in their minds and they can see with their hands, they can do things that you normally wouldn't think they could, but they can. You just have to give them a chance.

Shelle House (21:25):

Thank you so much for your time today, Elizabeth. I really appreciate you having me and speaking with me.

Elizabeth Spilman (21:32):

You're welcome.

Shelle House (21:33):

Thank you.