



# *'You Can Feel the Magic'*

## Neurodivergent People Explore Creative Potential at SSM Health Studio

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**E**ach day, as we walk into work at SSM Health Treffert Studios in Fond du Lac, Wisconsin, we can almost reach out and grab the energy in the room. Treffert Studios was designed with a mission to help neurodivergent individuals find their passion and express their talents, giving them a voice and tools to share their strengths with the world.<sup>1</sup>

It houses video and film equipment, musical instruments, art supplies, a theater, a kitchenette and more in an 8,500-square-foot facility. In partnership with Moraine Park Technical College, the studios use a six-part philosophy, known as the Treffert Approach (see sidebar on page 32).<sup>2</sup> Treffert Studios assists people of all ages, with specific offerings for those 18 and older, primarily focused on education for professional success and developing multimedia production skills.

The studios provide participants with a physical and virtual space to collaborate on creative arts and multimedia projects, develop teamwork and communication skills, secure employment and gain confidence to live more independent lives. It serves as a safe and supportive environment for young adults to explore their interests and talents and supports their health, including their mental and emotional well-being. "When you find something that you are passionate about and see that other people in your community value what you are doing, your self-esteem rises, your resilience rises and you can go on more confidently into the world," says Bryan Mischler, a psychotherapist

with Treffert Studios.

Spencer Depies, a 26-year-old with autism who works as a technician with the studios says, "If there was one word that would encompass the ideology of Treffert Studios, it would be 'hope.' Life is tough, but with a vehicle like Treffert Studios, my possibilities are endless."

### 'CARRYING THE TORCH' OF A VISIONARY

Many who learn about Treffert Studios for the first time ask these questions: How did this center come to be, and why is it in Fond du Lac? To answer, it's helpful to know more about the namesake of our facility: the late Dr. Darold Treffert.

Treffert was renowned for his expertise on savant syndrome. For over five decades, he sought to understand this phenomenon, in which a human being with a cognitive or intellectual disability simultaneously possesses a profound cognitive or creative ability that stands in stark contrast to his or her overall disability.

Treffert's savant research gained global attention from the media, the scientific community and the public. He published two books and

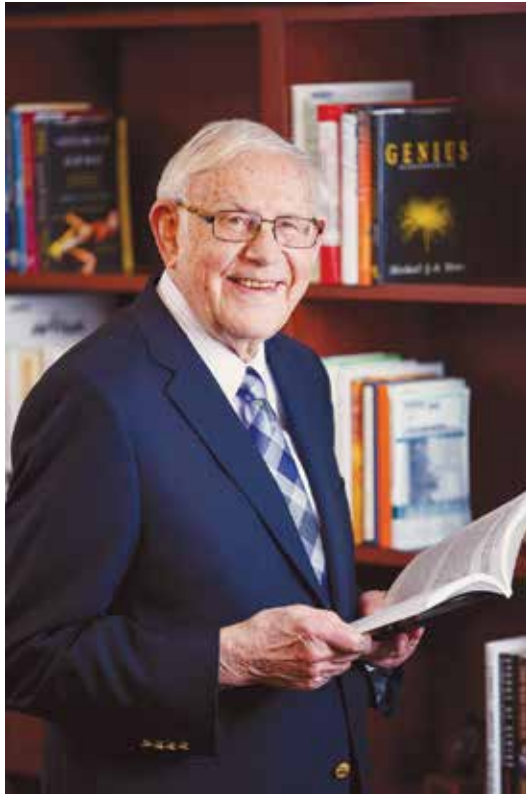


Photo courtesy of SSM Health Treffert Center

The late Dr. Darold Treffert

countless articles on savant syndrome, contributed to documentaries and television programs, and even consulted on the award-winning 1988 movie *Rain Man*, a film about an autistic savant and his brother.<sup>3</sup> Treffert was not only an accomplished psychiatrist and researcher but also a person who touched many lives with his kindness and generosity. He was a mentor to people from elementary school students to experienced clinicians, and he always had time to listen and encourage. He spent countless hours writing to parents who sought his advice and guidance, and he remained in touch with many families for years, following the progress of their children as they grew up.

Treffert believed in the power of love and the importance of supportive families and caregivers. He was often heard reminding caregivers that “love is a good therapist, too” and his own compassion and empathy were a testament to this belief.

Throughout his work, Treffert stayed in his

## THE TREFFERT APPROACH

The Treffert Approach, used across the work of SSM Health Treffert Studios, includes:

**Accurate assessment:** Call things by the right name. Accurate diagnoses and descriptions are key to selecting appropriate interventions.

**Strength-based focus:** Focus not only on the strengths of an individual, but also the strengths of the parents, teachers, clinicians and community.

**Nature and natural environment:** We all benefit from a connection to nature. Generalization [the learned action of generalizing and the ability to learn new skills] is enhanced when teaching is done in a natural environment, even more so through motion and play.

**Nurturing relationships:** Relationships are everything. Nurturing relationships is foundational to our ability to accept ourselves — and others — for the unique individuals we are, to respect differences and to appreciate commonalities.

**Sensory awareness:** Sensory understanding informs all we do. SSM Health Treffert Center and its programs seek to understand and help individuals integrate their senses and create environments that promote sensory sensitivity.

**Systems (increasing the capacity for success):** A systems approach recognizes multiple factors that influence an individual's success and are required for sustainable change.

hometown of Fond du Lac, opening what was then known as the Agnesian HealthCare Treffert Center in 2016. The center invites individuals of all abilities, their families and communities near and far to explore the potential of the human mind, focusing on strengths rather than limitations. It houses the Treffert Academy, Treffert Autism Services, Treffert Clinic and the Treffert Library. His approach is also used in area schools.<sup>4</sup> All of these programs incorporate the Treffert Approach's six-part philosophy.

In 2020, a group of inspired clinicians — working alongside neurodivergent individuals Treffert called “fresh new explorers” — began developing Treffert Studios. Treffert died in December 2020, leaving an enormous legacy to uphold. A team of more than 140 clinicians, educators and creative professionals is dedicated to “carrying the torch.”



## IMPROVING THE PATIENT EXPERIENCE

The most recent introduction to continuing and building on his work — SSM Health Treffert Studios — opened in spring 2023.

The term neurodiversity was coined by Judy Singer, an Australian sociologist, to promote equality and inclusion of all people while embracing neurological differences. Taking a broader perspective on neurodiversity, those using the Treffert Approach consider the term as reflective of everyone, including those labeled as “neurotypical.” This recognizes the unique ways that people experience and interact with the world around them and, similar to Treffert’s work, acknowledges that there is no one “right” way of thinking, learning and behaving, and that differences should not be seen as deficits but instead contributions to our larger neurodiverse community.

### A CULTURAL SHIFT NEEDED FOR SUSTAINABLE CHANGE

Those engaging in the Treffert Approach recognize the importance of various factors when working with neurodivergent people across clinical, educational and vocational systems. But team

members have seen occasions when supports faded, barriers resumed and individuals were removed from settings where they had been successful. As part of the approach, a central tenet of the mission and vision is to promote “system” change in culture, process, policy and training across settings to promote long-lasting change that will benefit communities. It will not suffice to continue to teach neurodivergent individuals to “fit in” when their skills and perspectives are every bit as valid as those of their neurotypical peers and colleagues. A cultural shift toward sustainable change in our communities, educational settings and the workplace is required. Lasting change and innovative solutions must be addressed at a system level. Treffert Studios was developed with this in mind and created offerings and services to have a positive and lasting impact on the systems that serve our neurodiverse community.

Treffert Studios offers multiple types of services and training, including:

- **Outpatient mental health clinic:** Services



Photo courtesy of SSM Health Treffert Studios

Dr. Jeremy Chapman, a child and adolescent psychiatrist, and a participant at SSM Health Treffert Studios spend time in the Zen garden. Raking the stones into patterns can be soothing and provides a canvas for meditation.

include medication management by board-certified prescribing clinicians, psychotherapy, art therapy, speech therapy, occupational therapy and neuropsychological testing.

■ **Creative services:** Offerings include fine arts, dance, yoga, music, film production, acting, voice-over, gaming, photography, cooking, illustration, creative writing and much more.

■ **Professional development program:**

This eight-week virtual program helps neurodivergent young adults gain professional skills, such as building resumés, sensory preferences, portfolios and individual multimedia projects. Sensory preferences relate to a person's unique way of processing and responding to sensory stimuli from the environment and what may be beneficial to them in the workplace — for example, noise-canceling headphones if a person focuses better when it's quiet. The ultimate goal is to help increase neurodiversity in the workforce, helping individuals gain employment and financial independence.

■ **Community consultations:** The program offers education or training to potential employers, schools and community businesses on neurodiversity-affirming practices and communication strategies.

■ **Sensory garden:** The environment is designed to stimulate and engage the five basic senses of sight, smell, sound, touch and taste. This type of garden allows participants to connect with nature while encouraging them to become more aware of their surroundings and their responses to them. Participants tap into the principles of mindfulness as they experience the calming effect of the covered archway, stone paths, Japanese Zen garden and waterfall.

■ **Social clubs and events:** Social clubs are designed for individuals to build friendships

and network while engaging in shared interests. Activities include chess, gaming, improv acting, nature adventures, family nights, film screenings and theatre productions, to name a few.

■ **Vocational supports:** These offerings will assist individuals with disabilities or other barriers in obtaining and maintaining meaningful employment, as well as coaching to advance their careers. Anticipated to launch in late 2023,



Photo courtesy of SSM Health Treffert Studios

Spencer Depies, 26, works in the kitchenette inside SSM Health Treffert Studios, housed on the campus of Moraine Park Technical College in Fond du Lac, Wisconsin. Depies is a technician at the studios, which focus on skill-building for neurodivergent people.

**“If there was one word that would encompass the ideology of Treffert Studios, it would be ‘hope.’ Life is tough, but with a vehicle like Treffert Studios, my possibilities are endless.”**

— SPENCER DEPIES



Photo by Julie Coy

This bejeweled artwork of a whimsical outdoor scene is one example of the “coolages” created by artist Grant Maniér, 27.

offerings will include job training and placement assistance, career counseling, resumé building and interview preparation.

■ **Independent skill building:** Classes aim to teach practical skills and knowledge that can be applied in a range of situations, whether participants are looking to enhance their career prospects, improve their personal life or simply learn new things.

**THE IMPORTANCE OF CONNECTION**

Every day, young people make new connections and friends as they learn to express themselves creatively, exchange ideas and build upon one another’s creations at the studios. Many young people, especially since COVID-19, have become accustomed to a more isolated lifestyle with fewer real-life interactions. This is particularly exacerbated for many young adults who face common

barriers to social success, such as anxiety, autism or learning and communication disorders. Treffert Studios offers a place for individuals to get out and interact with others within the context of learning new skills and within the welcoming, colorful and open environment of the center. Many participants we work with don’t communicate their best through speech or written word. Therefore, we are equipped to provide them with the tools they need to express themselves.

One example of someone thriving is Spencer Depies, who grew up around the Treffert Center. From a young age, Depies worked with one of our center’s psychotherapists, and from there, cultivated his communication and public speaking skills while rising in the world of competitive Judo. Today, he uses Treffert Studios to build out his autism self-advocacy



Watch a video on how SSM Health Treffert Studios in Fond du Lac, Wisconsin, is helping neurodivergent individuals to find their passion and express their talents.

social media accounts and is looking to eventually do live broadcasts from the studios. “Treffert Studios has taught me a great deal about myself, such as creativity, accountability and how to build friendships,” says Depies. Through this platform provided by the studios, Depies not only shares his many talents with others, but his message on inspiration helps other young adults to succeed in their pursuits.

The work and community of the Treffert Center have been so meaningful to those involved that some families have even relocated to be closer to it. Grant Maniér and his mother know its impact



Watch a video on Treffert Studios artist Grant Maniér creating his “coolages” using recyclable materials to help raise money for community efforts.

(Video source: Coca-Cola Southwest Beverages)

all too well. The 27-year-old with autism, who grew up in Texas, finds great support and advocacy through his mother, Julie Coy. As a boy, he tore shreds of paper as a coping mechanism when he became scared or overwhelmed. Coy helped Maniér turn this habit into an artistic endeavor, and through further support provided by Treffert Studios to help expand on his talents and provide him with the professional resources to work outside the studio, Maniér’s collage artworks, called “coolages,” are unique and

beautiful creations that he makes for multiple community endeavors.

Maniér’s artwork is not only visually stunning, but it also serves a greater purpose. He uses his art to raise awareness about the importance of recycling and protecting the environment. Through his platform as an eco-artist, Maniér advocates for the neurodiverse community and raises awareness about autism. He has become a role model for many individuals with autism and other disabilities, showing that they, too, can pursue their passions and make a positive impact on the world.

### SPARKING TALENT AROUND THE GLOBE

Now that Treffert Studios is open, the goal is to

build a worldwide community of families and individuals who benefit from its services and whose dreams we can support. Team members have connected and aided many individuals in meeting their social and vocational goals since opening the physical location in early 2023. Looking ahead, we aim to expand this work to a virtual platform to allow us to connect with others around the world and further carry forward Treffert’s legacy.

You can feel the magic at Treffert Studios, where people discover their talents and nurture those skills into social and professional success. The studios allow those creating there to tell its story, even as we continue to shape it.

**JEREMY CHAPMAN** is a child and adolescent psychiatrist at SSM Health Treffert Studios. His clinical interests include neurodevelopmental disorders, such as autism spectrum disorder and ADHD, as well as intellectual and communication disorders. **MEG PUDDY** is director of behavioral health community-based services for SSM Health Greater Fond du Lac.

### NOTES

1. SSM Health Treffert Studios, <https://www.ssmhealth.com/treffert-center/resources/treffert-studios>.
2. “The Treffert Approach,” SSM Health, <https://www.ssmhealth.com/treffert-center/resources/the-treffert-approach>.
3. Dr. Darold A. Treffert, *Extraordinary People: Understanding Savant Syndrome* (Lincoln, Neb.: iUniverse, 2006); Dr. Darold A. Treffert, *Islands of Genius: The Bountiful Mind of the Autistic, Acquired, and Sudden Savant* (Philadelphia: Jessica Kingsley Publishers, 2010).
4. Treffert Way for the Exceptional Mind, <https://www.treffertway.com>. In 2019, the Treffert Approach was expanded to public education through the Treffert Way for the Exceptional Mind, a partnership with the Treffert Center and the North Fond du Lac School District. This charter school now offers K-8 instruction. Exploration High School in this same school district incorporates the Treffert Approach into education for a broad range of students in grades 9-12. Students gain early experience in the workforce, engage in service learning, mentoring, experience with creative media and leadership curriculum.

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