

JENNIFER FREESE

I have been crocheting since I was a sophomore in college. I asked a friend if she could teach me how to make a blanket and three weeks later, I completed my first piece of art. After that there was no stopping me and I kept creating every few weeks. I have gotten to the point I can make most blankets in a week to 10 days when my mind is moving fast, and I have gotten to the place where my hands can go just as fast as my mind. In 2014, I discovered I could make a lot of other things besides blankets after I had blanketed just about every person I knew and crafted a special blanket, sometimes several, for every expectant parent I knew. I discovered I could make all sorts of things – sweaters, hats, scarves, purses - but best of all stuffed animals!

Since I was a little girl I have called my stuffed animals Soft Friends so I made a handful of them for my nieces and nephews at my mom's request and they were a huge hit! The best part was the incredible color combinations I could use to make the most spectacular animals anyone would want to play with or collect!

After selling on my own for a while, I renamed my brand Maya's Soft Friends after my faithful companion and ever-present service dog Maya. Although I have never made a dog like her, I have made many animals that are inspired by her personality. I can create any animal if given enough time. I have also made numerous cartoon characters, super heroes and Disney characters for people who have requested them. My personal favorite is one I made for myself: which is a three-foot tall Pink Panther. Pink Panther was my absolute favorite character growing up.

I crochet regularly as a way to help quiet my mind and to keep my hands busy instead of fidgeting. I find my anxiety slows and I am much more focused when I work on my art. I am also a musician and I believe strongly that the arts help the bipolar mind find a sense of focus and peace as we find chaos in many areas in our lives. Instead, this chaos leads to beauty and often brings a sense of tranquility.

WHY I CREATE?

My first medium of choice is music. I have been a musician since before I could form words, but since this is a visual art show I will share more about one of my other loves and my journey into the arts as a whole. I believe that being creative comes almost hand in hand with being bipolar. I love to learn about new mediums and do so regularly. I feel that just like learning an instrument, learning a new art form stimulates

the brain and keeps us active. If I fall in love with it, I will stick with it until I am proficient and potentially beyond, like my crochet. If not, at least I tried!

For the first 12 years of my life, I believed the visual arts (painting, drawing and sculpting) would be my future. I was blessed to go to a school that allowed us to use alternative ways to present our book reports, history projects or other projects to get the point across. I remember doing my report on the state of Indiana on a handmade ceramic and glazed state flower bouquet. I wrote the important facts about the state on each bud with my trusty paint brush! I did a science project in the form of a comic strip! It was an amazing way to see how creative I could be and really allowed the bipolar side of my brain an outlet that was healthy and encouraging, rather than being punished for being disruptive. I am one of many that was an undiagnosed childhood bipolar in the 80s. I strongly believe being creative is what kept me from fading away or feeling there was something seriously wrong with me.

The medium I chose for this show is my crochet. I have learned how to make just about anything your heart desires out of yarn. I have my own little yarn shop in my basement so I can just create at will. I like the repetitive nature of the stitches that when woven together create some of the most beautiful and surprising things you could ever dream up. When I am anxious I return to this medium to calm my soul. It has much the same effect on me as my music, which is what my degree is in. I still perform regularly with the UMS Choral Union in Ann Arbor with my trusty service dog, Maya, at my side. I think the ability to create, to see the beauty in things that others don't or to take raw materials and have a vision for something that has not been made yet is a gift. For me, creating is as important as breathing. My house is filled with medium upon medium and music is always playing. I thank God for the need and drive to create and the ability to be able to do so!