

Very Special Artists Deserve Very Special Arts

By Nancy Gray

Photo courtesy of VSA ARTS

VSA arts (formerly Very Special Arts), is an international, non-profit organization that provides access to the arts for people with disabilities for purposes of education, recreation and career development. Founded in 1974 by Ambassador Jean Kennedy Smith, the organization offers comprehensive programs in the literary, performing and visual arts.

As a national arts education organization, VSA arts implements these programs in partnership with local schools, cultural and recreational institutions, universities, arts agencies, disability associations and health and rehabilitation organizations. Each year, more than 16,000 people participate in VSA programs across the state.

On a statewide basis, programs are created at the "grass-roots" level—spirited by individuals and families who want an opportunity for their family members to participate in the arts. Below are a few examples of VSA programs offered throughout Virginia:

- **Charlottesville/Albemarle** offers programs in literary, performing, and visual arts. Adults participating in University of Virginia's Festival of the Book published a book of poems, written entirely by people with disabilities in the Charlottesville area. An artist with disabilities illustrated the book in partnership with the James Madison University Art Department, which hosts an annual two-day arts festival. Each year more than 200 children with disabilities come together to participate in arts activities.

- **Harrisonburg:** Pi Kappa Phi, the honorary fraternity for undergraduate art students, hosts VSA arts of Virginia, Harrisonburg's annual Art Festival. Students with varied abilities in elementary, middle and high schools from around the Shenandoah Valley gather to experience the visual and performing arts in hands-on activities.

This cooperative venture of James Madison University, Harrisonburg City Parks and Recreation, and VSA arts of Virginia, generously supported by the Darrin McHone Charitable Foundation, takes place for two days each April.

- **Lynchburg's Rightmere Children's Museum,** *Amazement Square* is among Very Special Arts of Virginia's newest program partners. They are serving children with special needs through outreach programs to area schools. The Challenged Sports Exchange (C.S.E.) Hand Bell choir will meet at the New Covenant School on Fleetwood Drive.

- **Richmond** is active in all areas of the performing and visual arts. The da Vinci Project provides open studio space and instruction for artists of all abilities each Saturday morning, as well as additional arts programming for community partners. In cooperation with the Positive Vibe Cafe, www.getlostMD.com a restaurant that trains individuals of



disadvantaged backgrounds to work in the food service industry, works of artists with disabilities are featured in rotating exhibits on a regular basis.

The eXceptional Orchestra program involves students working alongside professional composers and performers from the Richmond Symphony in concerts open to the public. Finally, a bell choir provides additional opportunities for experiencing the performing arts.

- **Roanoke District:** Contact Juanita Thornton at the Blue Ridge Independent Living Center, 1502-D Williamson Road, Roanoke VA 24012, 540/342-1231 or jthorton@brilc.org

- **Virginia Beach** has been active since 1985, when it introduced an annual citywide arts festival for children. When the event was retired in 2000, it had grown to a five-day arts cornucopia that served approximately 5,000 school children with varying levels of abilities.

In 1997, the Virginia Beach district introduced a drama program (one of the first of its kind) on the high school level. Because of its success, an adult production was added to the annual schedule; the troupes have performed everything from Shakespeare to original plays to revues and Broadway musicals. The district now focuses exclusively on adult populations, serving people with all levels of abilities. Programs include a "tone chime choir" and art classes in collage, watercolor, acrylic painting and wheel thrown pottery. Exhibitions of artwork are shown at the Stockley Gardens Art Show each spring and fall, and a theatrical production bows each November. ■

Nancy Gray is the former executive director of VSA Arts of Virginia. For more information about the organization, please call 804-230-0246 or email execdir@vsava.org or go to www.vsava.org