

Talent, not disability, comes first at 'real inclusion' Art Access

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SALT LAKE CITY — John Hess is a premier fiber artist. Peter Scott Stone never erases anything. He is the perfect draftsman, and Jose Hernandez Lopez is an artist of spectacular talent, says Ruth Lubbers, executive director of Art Access since 1993.

Lopez uses elastic from underwear and socks to create his macrame projects — about all he had during his time in prison.

When it comes to Very Special Arts of Utah, or Art Access, as the nonprofit organization is more commonly known in Utah, "real inclusion" is paramount to the success of Art Access no matter who you are.

It doesn't matter if you're young, middle-aged, elderly. Or blind, sighted, autistic, mentally ill.

It doesn't matter if you're a poor college student trying to "beef up" a portfolio or a refugee.

What matters most is that you love art. In fact, the more you enjoy art, the better.

At Art Access, "there's no such thing as routine; every day and everyone is outstanding," says Lubbers, who suggests that those she has met with schizophrenia would stay in bed all day if not for the arts. She is happy to provide them with an opportunity.



Ruth Lubbers talks about the Front Door Shop at Art Access Gallery. All art for sale at the shop is under \$100. (Kathryn Jones)

Soon after the first Art Access Gallery started on Pierpont Avenue in 1991, both the PARTNER'S Mentoring Program and the Teen Workshop Program were developed, two of 11 successful art programs still in motion today.

As the programs grew, so did the community interest and need for a bigger place. Today, the gallery is located at 230 S. 500 West, and the building's size has almost doubled from 1,500 to 2,800 square feet.

Various awards were received by the gallery before the move including the first Image Award from the Disability Law Center, a prestigious award that honored the company's philosophy of inclusion: "Artists with disabilities are talented artists first."

What's most important to Lubbers is that artists be taken at their artistic value and that no one is labeled incapable because of their disability.



"French Ties" by artist Marci Blackerby is on display at Art Access. (Kathryn Jones)

Stereotyping is simply not on her to-do list.

"I want the art to stand out on its own," she says.

And it has.

Since 1991, when the first gallery was offered as one of the many programs at Art Access, many teachers as well as students have come to the gallery to learn and to grow wiser by the learning.

Travis Hulbert, who suffered a brain injury when he was small and then again in 1999 from whooping cough, had difficulties returning to art, though he had been a participant in the Teen Workshop Program for the previous two years.

"After his last brain injury, he was practically nonfunctioning," says his mother, Carolyn. Working with others within Art Access has really helped him, she says.

The teachers and students have been great for his self-esteem, and Travis has always been able to choose a painting for the art show held at the Art Access Gallery.

Travis paints with oil and acrylic, and his paintings are "concrete and introspective. He does very well in pottery,

too, but he doesn't like it so I don't push it," Carolyn says.

The bottom line: Travis believes himself to be a professional artist and tells others so, and nothing could be better for him than that belief, states his mother.

Besides the Teen Workshop Program, teens and adults can also enjoy the Deseret Wanderings Adult and Teen Literary Arts programs where creative writing workshops are taught by professional writers, or adults can become involved in the PARTNERS Visual Artist Mentoring Program. With the mentoring, a professional artist connects one-on-one with a student and helps in the refining of various art techniques as well as helping with the task of sending the student's artwork out into the community.

Students not only sell their work through exposure at the Art Access Gallery, but their artwork is purchased and collected for loan use on a short-term basis for various libraries, care centers, and other facilities at a cost of \$60.

Younger children experience VSA through collaboration with educators and programs that bring professional artists to their school. Currently, 37 Utah schools participate in the program.

"It's great for students to have access to the arts, it advances their education immensely," says Amanda Finlayson, integrated arts in school coordinator.

It's good to be connected to fellow students, and it's great for the professional artists, she says. Not only do the teachers benefit from having work, they are able to share their work with kindergarten through 12th grade students who receive special education services.

And the kudos for professional artists doesn't end there.

Because of their experience in class or teaching a workshop at Art Access, they may change a segment or two of their current art in progress because of an idea gleaned from the frank opinion of someone in class; in short, they mix with people in the community they might not normally meet and are better teachers and artists because of the experience.

And that includes every student as well.

"We provide people with an open, caring environment," says Jean Gardner, workshop coordinator at Art Access. "People don't always know the class is integrated, they just hang out and connect up with others."

"Art is important to everyone" says Lubbers, who suggests that creativity strengthens problem solving skills. Students, whether disabled or not, learn to make better decisions through art that "carry over" into their everyday lives.

"Art is forgiving," she adds. "It is the most accessible of all disciplines. Each student can enter in at their own level and can strive to do their best. In turn, the experience gives them a voice as part of a community."

And a true community is not complete unless you invite the entire community, she says.

Upcoming events at the Art Access Gallery, 230 S. 500 West, No. 125

Mondays-Fridays, 6-9 p.m.

Exhibits:

Justin Wheatley, mixed media, through March 12.

Cindy McConkie, photography. Art Access II Gallery, through March 12.

Workshop:

Art Access adult workshop on pop surreal painting with Jason Jones, professional artist, March 27, 9 a.m.-5 p.m.

Call Jean Gardner at 801-364-3250 for information.

Ongoing event:

The Front Door Shop at Art Access has beautiful art for \$100 or less.