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(F1C)

FAR guides special students in the arts



Eric Harrison is the director of the conservatory, which was founded by a coalition of parents and friends before special education classes were available in schools. Now it offers complementary programs to what the children learn in school. (Staff photo by Stephen Cantrell)

By JULIE BROWN

"To be handicapped is not to be talented."

That's the slogan of the FAR Conservatory of Performing Arts for Retarded Citizens, which is housed in the First Presbyterian Church of Birmingham.

The conservatory, which was founded in 1974, has 150 students who range in age from six to 25, according to Eric Harrison, conservatory director. Harrison took over the director's job on May 1 this year.

The conservatory was founded in June 1974, said Mimi Morton, a member of the board of directors. "It had been in planning for about eight or nine months before that. The first year there were maybe 50 students."

"There are now many more areas that we service than there were in the beginning," said Lenore Foster, another member of the board of directors. Mrs. Foster became interested in the

conservatory when her daughter, Cindy, was a student there.

Classes at the conservatory are divided into four general departments: the movement department, music department, theater arts department and visual arts department. The conservatory is staffed by full-time teachers, who are assisted by volunteers.

"Informally, we do have department chairpersons," Harrison said. "We have eight full-time teachers. They are both certified and non-certified, and are usually heavily steeped in their own disciplines."

"We also have up to 30 volunteers," he said. "They really come from all interests, vocations and backgrounds."

"We have a number of high school students," Mrs. Morton said. "It's a good place for young people to try out working with handicapped children."

The conservatory is a member of the Oakland County Association for Retarded Citizens (OCARC), a non-profit organization. Funds for the conservatory

are provided by a number of sources.

"It comes from a wide variety of sources," Harrison said. "The three main sources are individuals, groups and organizations, and foundations, such as the United Foundation."

The total operating budget for 1978-79 was \$66,000, Harrison said. The projected budget for 1979-80 is \$98,000.

"The increase is due to more class offerings and expansion of the program," he said. FAR students do pay tuition, but there is a scholarship program available, Harrison said.

A dinner-dance to benefit the conservatory will be held Sunday, Sept. 16, at the San Marino Club in Troy, with conservatory students performing for the guests at the dinner dance.

The church facilities — office and classroom space, plus use of an auditorium — are donated to the conservatory. Mrs. Morton said.

"We would for a variety of reasons like to have our own facilities," she

said. "Our dance teacher in particular would like to have wooden floors, rather than asphalt tile."

"Most of our equipment is the church's, too," Harrison said. "They have been extremely good to us."

In addition to teaching individual students, the conservatory also instructs residents from area group homes and from public schools.

"We've worked with the public schools, also," Mrs. Morton said. "Generally they contact us. We take a presentation to their school, and they almost always want to become a part of the program."

"For most of those schools, we go to them (to hold classes), rather than having them come here," Mrs. Foster said.

One example of such a program is the program designed for autistic children, held at Franklin School this summer. Twenty students were involved in the program.

"It's the first time FAR Conservatory

has had an autistic program," Harrison said.

The conservatory offers a Monday through Thursday class schedule, with summer classes offered on Tuesdays and Thursdays. Earlier this week registration for the fall class programs took place for the sixth consecutive program offered by the conservatory.

Classes at the conservatory will begin on Sept. 10 and will be held during afternoons and evenings from 5-8:30 p.m.

Harrison summarized the purpose of the conservatory as "personal growth through self-awareness, and development of personal discipline. There's the socialization that comes from interaction with people engaged in the same process."

"It's fun, too," he added. Information about the FAR Conservatory, and the benefit dinner-dance, is available at the FAR office, 1669 W. Maple, Birmingham, or by calling 646-3347.



Robbie has been involved with FAR since he was 3. His latest love is learning to tap dance, which he performs during the increasing number of appearances FAR students are being asked to make. (Staff photo by Stephen Cantrell)

Robbie Howard

By CAROL MAHONEY

If there are charter members, can there also be charter students? If so, Robert Howard, 14, could qualify based on his long association with the FAR Conservatory.

Robbie, as he is called by his friends, has been attending classes sponsored by FAR since he was three years old. "He's been involved in every class they've had," said his mother, Beatrice Howard of Birmingham. She has been a member of the conservatory's board of directors and has held offices including president and vice president.

She explained that the conservatory evolved in 1974 out of what was originally a coalition of parents and friends of children with special educational needs. Prior to the time special education became mandatory in the public schools, FAR was primarily a training center operating in three classrooms in the First Presbyterian Church in Birmingham.

"We tried to make the public aware that these children could learn and could fit into the community and be useful citizens and not a tax burden," said Mrs. Howard.

When classes in basic academic instruction became available in the regular schools, the FAR Conservatory for the Performing Arts was instituted to offer complementary programs to

handicapped students.

Classes in music, dance, drama, and the visual arts are offered regularly, and Robbie has sampled most of them. His latest love is tap dancing, which he began in January.

"He took to it like a duck to water," said Mrs. Howard. "He adores it."

WHEN STUDENTS from the conservatory were asked to perform at a seminar at Wayne State University this summer, Robbie donned a top hat, added a cane and danced on a table top for his number.

"He's really a ham," said his mother, smiling. "He sometimes freezes up in a small group, but just put him on a stage."

She added that the students at FAR love the applause of appreciative audiences.

"They love the feeling that people enjoy what they are doing."

"It's fantastic for these children to have a place where they can go and be introduced to all the performing arts. Music has been the most marvelous means of communication for them," she said.

"I love music and I love art," said Robbie emphatically.

A giant bulletin board that almost covers the wall of the Howard kitchen

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Nancy Justice has learned to accompany her own songs with an autoharp. She learned to play the autoharp during classes at the conservatory. Her interest in music did not surface during conventional schooling experiences. (Staff photo by Randy Borst)

Nancy Justice

By LORRAINE MCCLISH

Thursday is the favorite day of the week for Nancy Justice because it's the day she takes autoharp lessons at FAR Conservatory.

The 15-year-old blonde from Farmington Hills has been studying the sounding board for two years now, learning to push the correct buttons with her left hand while strumming with her right.

"It is excellent therapy as well as enjoyment for her," said her mother, "because it forces her to use both hands."

"And now she sometimes sings along with her own playing while she plays the piano."

When Nancy reached the age of three, her family was convinced that she was unable to talk.

"But one day in the car while we were all singing," Barbara Justice said, "Nancy started to sing with us. She was saying in music what she couldn't say verbally, and from then on, (music) helped her string her words together."

Any innate pull toward, or talent music or musical things the teenager had, never surfaced during her schooling in Kenbrook Elementary or the Farmington Training Schools because the opportunity for experimentation wasn't there.

"But the people at the conservatory take what few strengths these children

have and build on them," Mrs. Justice said.

"I saw one very severely handicapped child playing the piano with one hand, and that one arm was the only part of her body that she could control."

"That makes for a lot of confidence in the child," she said.

THE PERFORMANCE Mrs. Justice referred to took place during a June recital, one in which her daughter also took part.

"It took a lot of doing just to get those children up on a stage," Mrs. Justice said.

"Nancy had a very small part, but she was so proud to be part of it, so proud to be asked that she glowed for two whole days. And that glow shined through on all of those children," she said.

Mrs. Justice chose the autoharp for her daughter's first musical studies because it is a beginner can play harmonies in a short time.

The every-Thursday lessons also are what Mrs. Justice called "something different to do after school, and all kids need that."

Nancy doesn't own her own autoharp yet "because the Thursday lessons are so very, very special for her."

"Maybe having the instrument in the house would take some of the edge off the specialness for her."



The dance has always been John Gleeson's favorite activity at FAR. With encouragement from his teachers, he now choreographs his own performances, the most recent one "Superman." (Staff photo by Steve Dietter)

John Gleeson

By MARY KLEMIC

John Gleeson, of Troy, has always loved to dance. His mother recalls that he would dance with her in the family's living room when he was a youngster.

Now, at 24, John has choreographed and performed his own dances in public. He has won awards for his dancing in statewide competition as well.

"He's had this talent since he was a little boy," said his mother, Mrs. John A. Gleeson. "I could see he really loved to dance. We used to think it would be nice if he could go somewhere to learn more."

John is mentally handicapped. Until just a few years ago, he didn't have any place where he could go to develop his talent.

But John has been attending the FAR Conservatory of Performing Arts for Retarded Citizens in Birmingham for the past five years, where he is now in an advanced social folk dance class.

"It's nice to know that there are places like FAR," Mrs. Gleeson said. "A lot of people think that (the handicapped) can't do anything."

"Music, to me, is for everyone," said Mrs. Gleeson. "I've always thought that music brings out the best of everyone, whether they're handicapped or not."

John is one of the STARS of FAR, a troupe of the conservatory's outstanding students that entertains community

and school groups.

Last November, he won honorable mention in a performing arts competition at Oakland University. He competed against mentally impaired persons from all over Michigan.

JOHN HAS danced to Elvis Presley songs and to music from "Grease," dressed in appropriate costumes designed by his mother. He dances to the theme from "Star Wars" dressed as Darth Vader and waving a beam of light in the dark, to dramatic effect. Mrs. Gleeson said that many people have been impressed with his dancing, especially his instructor at the conservatory, Beverlee Paterson.

"She can't believe how nice it comes out of him," Mrs. Gleeson said. "She says he can improvise a lot of things, that he really listens to the music."

Mrs. Gleeson said that while Mrs. Paterson may give him a few points, John works out most of his choreography by himself in his bedroom.

John is trainable, not educable. He may never be able to read or write, but he receives vocational training at the Lamphere O.T.I. unit in Madison Heights. He has a job cutting ribbons for a nursery.

John goes to the conservatory on Monday evenings. His class is taught

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Travels with Margaret

By CORINNE ABATT

The back of a shipping room might sound like an unlikely location for previewing great art. However, to Margaret DeGrace of Birmingham, it is a place where she can see the best of the world's art. It's a thrilling spot to be in when paintings and sculpture arrive.

"When I am there watching the unpacking I think how lucky I am to be there — it never loses its fascination," she said.

While the bright, smiling lady emphasized that her job is more behind the scenes than out in front — "downstairs rather than upstairs" is the way she put it — it does have some glamorous and highly memorable moments.

ONE OF THOSE MOMENTS, actually a week, was her recent trip to England to make final arrangements for the promotion of the John Singer Sar-

gent show, which will be at the Detroit Institute of Arts Oct. 17 to Dec. 9. Outside of two exhibitions earlier this year in Great Britain, this is the only place the Sargent works will be shown in this part of the framework. Many have been drawn from private collections and will be returned after they leave Detroit.

The show opened at a country home in Leeds and then moved to the National Portrait Gallery. At the National Portrait Gallery opening, Mrs. DeGrace was establishing a solid foundation for the American debut of this major show of Sargent's works.

She had color slides taken, became acquainted with Richard Ormond, a grand nephew of Sargent who has researched the painter's life and works extensively and who will be in Detroit for the opening, met the relatives of many of Sargent's royal subjects and generally became acquainted with the

exhibition and its background.

Sargent, incidentally, never married. Ormond is the grandson of his sister, Violet.

Mrs. DeGrace had an opportunity to watch the installation of the exhibition at the National Portrait Gallery. Again, a backstage glimpse that she particularly enjoys.

"They had trouble making the labels stick to the walls," she said, "and they had to redo all of them."

But once properly installed with labels in place, Mrs. DeGrace said it was exciting.

"IT'S REALLY AN EVERYBODY kind of show — like Matinee. Everytime I walked into the Matinee show, it was wonderful. It danced a lot. I loved that show."

So she predicts that this one too will be a crowd pleaser. It has, she said, a lot of glamour, and shows life and people

in the Edwardian period — one of the grandest eras of British history.

"The surprises in the show," she said, "are the charcoal portrait heads and the watercolors he did while traveling in Europe with members of his family."

Mrs. DeGrace makes no pretense of being an expert on art. She is involved in working with the news media, but she does see herself looking at museums and art from the perspective of the average person. And this is something museum and art professionals can't always do.

Because of this, Mrs. DeGrace is an inveterate museum visitor. When she wasn't busy in London with the details of the Sargent show, she was hopping a bus, a cab or a Thames boat to visit English museums.

"You can't wear London out," she said smiling. "It's such a different tempo from New York."

Back from London with barely enough time to unpack, pack again and pick up color slides, she was off to New York to call on all major magazine editors to see which were interested in doing stories on the Sargent show.

Between phone calls and interviews, she squeezed in visits to the Frick Museum, the Museum of Modern Art, the Whitney Museum. "They make great kitch in the garden court," The Cloisters and the American Folk Art Museum, among others.

"THE FRICK MUSEUM is so beautiful and you can consume it in a visit if you take it easy. Other museums get out of focus — your pupils get out of focus and your feet hurt."

Mrs. DeGrace, who has a degree in Journalism from Marygrove College, was a graduate fellow in the same field at the University of Michigan. She was working as a free-lancer

when she was hired by the Detroit Institute of Arts to do the publicity and promotion for the exhibition of the treasures of Tutankhamen, a 1950s forerunner of the popular King Tut exhibit.

One of the museum people she met while working on that first project was Francis Robinson, then curator of ancient art.

"As it turned out, he became one of my best friends, but I think at the time I really tried his patience," she said.

Since working on that first show, Mrs. DeGrace has had some memorable experiences along the way and friendships with celebrities as well as respected authorities are what she counts among her own treasures.

There is a quick pen self-portrait by the late Zero Mostel, who visited the museum with Mrs. DeGrace as his guide while he was in Detroit in "Fiddler on the Roof."