

FINE ARTS

Special Arts scholarship triumphs over disabilities

BY LINDA CHLOMIN
STAFF WRITER

While volunteering to create art with disabled children and adults at the Very Special Arts Festival over the last three years I've had the opportunity to observe Jack Olds working in the wings as a member of the Southeast Region Committee of Very Special Arts Michigan.

Olds, a Livonia artist and volunteer extraordinaire, strongly believes in the Very Special Arts mission of providing programs for people with disabilities to grow, to whatever degree possible, through the arts.

It puts a smile on your face to work with these children and adults, and I'm sure Olds feels the same way I do.

Always the arts advocate, Olds for several years encouraged me to serve on the Southeast Region Committee. In June, my schedule finally permitted me to join five other members working to produce the annual festival, and

award grants to groups such as JARC in Southfield. So, it's especially satisfying to be involved with honoring Olds by awarding a scholarship in his name. The winner of the first Jack Olds Scholarship to an adult performing or visual artist will be presented at the Very Special Arts Festival Friday-Saturday, May 1-2 at Wonderland Mall in Livonia.

"I was sort of speechless when I was told about the award," said Olds, former grants director for the Michigan Council for the Arts (now the Michigan Council for Arts and Cultural Affairs). "I hope it's going to enable someone to accomplish what they wouldn't have been able to do before."

Jack Olds embodies the heart of the Very Special Arts philosophy. "Very Special Arts is important because it presents an opportunity for people with disabilities to express themselves in creative ways that are personally satisfying," said Olds, "and to enable the public to realize the innate gift and pride of accomplishment in all of us."

The Southeast Region Committee of Very Special Arts began thinking about awarding a scholarship in Olds' name more than two years ago. This is the first scholarship to be given to an individual. Until now only groups have been awarded funds to operate arts programs.

Spirit

"Jack epitomizes the spirit of Very Special Arts," said Millie Stachowski, who will be honored as Very Special Arts Teacher of the Year in Grand Rapids March 4. "Supporting other artists is what Jack is all about."

Olds spearheaded and coordinated the first Very Special Arts Michigan touring art exhibit created by children with disabilities. One of the venues it was displayed at was Urban Park-Detroit Art Center in Trapper's Alley in Greektown. This year's exhibit will be on display at the festival in May.

"Jack quietly works behind the scenes," said Jody Contrad-Stark, president of the Southeast Region Committee. "He's such a man of integrity, so caring and humble. You get the sense of how much he cares about people. He truly believes in the importance of the arts for persons of every ability and the power of the arts to transform."

Connie Lott, a fellow committee member and executive director of the FAR Conservatory in Birmingham, added "Jack appreciates the art and artist in all of us."

History in the arts

Growing up, Olds saw first hand the positive effect art had on an uncle with a disability. Maybe, that's why he spent more than three decades working as an arts administrator and supporting Very Special Arts. One opportunity just seemed to lend itself to another to help the arts.

In late 1967, Olds began a 12 year tenure as a board member and eventually became director of the Iowa Arts Council. He first learned about Very Special Arts after he was elected to the board of directors for the National Assembly for Arts Agencies and chaired the arts education committee. At the time he was also a university art professor and four times a year flew to Washington, D.C. to sit on the Alliance for Arts Education board of the J.F. Kennedy Center for the Performing Arts, in Washington, D.C.

"That's when I originally got started with Very Special Arts," said Olds. "The Alliance for Arts Education, from which Very Special Arts was born as an educational affiliate of the J.F. Kennedy Center for the Performing Arts, came about because of the Kennedy's involvement with the disabled."

An international organization founded in 1974 by Jean Kennedy Smith, Very Special Arts enriches the lives of persons with disabilities by encouraging

development through music, drama, dance, and visual arts programs then sharing their accomplishments.

Upon returning home from one of his trips to Washington, D.C., Olds knew Very Special Arts "was a program he was anxious to get working in Iowa." Under Olds direction, the Iowa Arts Council funded money to help start a Very Special Arts in the state. The nonprofit organization held its first festival at Luther College in Iowa.

Very Special Arts Michigan offers programs in schools, hospitals, nursing homes, arts and community centers throughout the state.

By the time Olds, a native of Marquette, returned to Michigan in fall of 1979, Very Special Arts was established here so Olds supported Very Special Arts from his vantage point as grants director for the Michigan Council for the Arts. After retiring in 1990, Olds became active as a volunteer with Very Special Arts Michigan, serving on the state board and eventually joining the Southeast Region Committee. He also joined the Livonia Arts Commission for three years and eventually became president of the group.

Karen DiChiera of the Michigan Opera Theatre whom I knew through my work at the Michigan Council for the Arts was involved and wanted to have this festival across from the Fisher Building at New Center One," said Olds. "Karen was one of the founders of the Southeast Region Committee. I thought the festival was a great idea to showcase persons triumphing over their disabilities through the arts."

Since then, the Southeast Region Committee has held eight festivals featuring performing artists with disabilities. Look for the showcase complete with hands-on art activities the first weekend in May. Children and adult performers with mental and physical challenges are still needed to participate in the festival spotlighting dance, vocal and

instrumental achievements of special needs school/community groups and solo acts from the metro Detroit area. Deadline for entry is March 16. For applications, teachers and art therapists should call (248) 646-3347.

In the last few years, Olds spent less and less time volunteering with Very Special Arts because he wanted to concentrate on his own art. His first love, besides wife Joann, is print making. Hung from a clothesline in his basement in a wood cut.

The self-portrait with his cut will be given to recipients of the Jack Olds Scholarship Award.

"I wanted to accomplish certain things like competing and having a one-man show," said Olds.

He has done both. Through March 15 Olds exhibits his part of a drawing in the "Exquisite Corpse" exhibition at the Ann Arbor Art Center. One of his prints is also in the Alma College Statewide Touring Print Exhibition currently at the Saginaw Art Museum.

Very Special Arts Michigan offers programs in schools, hospitals, nursing homes, arts and community centers throughout the state. For more information, call (248) 423-1080.

Linda Ann Chlomin is an arts reporter for The Observer & Eccentric! Newspapers. If you have an interesting idea for a story involving the visual or performing arts, call (734) 953-2145.

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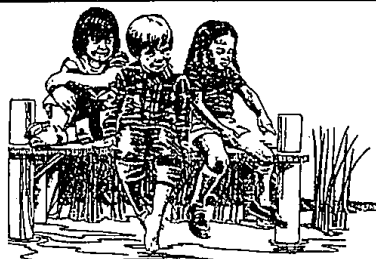
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