

THE ESSEX REPORTER

Arts organization makes Essex home

VSA employs art to enhance the lives of people with disabilities

By Jason Starr

The Essex Reporter



From left, Marguerite Adelman, Judith Chalmers and Peggy Rainville of VSA Vermont pose in their new office in Essex.

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New to Essex is VSA Vermont, a statewide affiliate of an international organization founded at the same time and in the same vein as the Special Olympics: to engage the capabilities and enhance the confidence of people with disabilities.

VSA Vermont accomplishes its mission through art, employing traveling art teachers and hosting events to lead children and adults of all abilities in dance, painting, poetry and theater. Founded in 1986, the organization had been located at the Woolen Mill in Winooski until moving into a new Essex Town Center building near the Shoppes and Cinema in June.

The new location is more easily accessible for people with disabilities and has better parking availability, Development Director Marguerite Adelman said. Seven people work out of the Carmichael Street office, but the

majority of the organization's work takes place at public and private schools and at the locations of fellow non-profits that serve people with disabilities.

VSA once stood for "Very Special Arts," said Adelman. But the organization now uses the letters only, because "special" has developed a demeaning connotation in the disabled community, she said. VSA is part of the John F. Kennedy Center for the Performing Arts' Office on Accessibility. Its \$370,000 budget comes from Kennedy Center grants, individual donors and government contracts.

The organization's education programs start at the preschool level, where VSA teaching artists help rural, home-based preschools teach reading and creative expression to children ages 5 and under. VSA also mentors preschool teachers on including artistic expression in their centers.

At the grade-school level, VSA works with the Howard Center for students with emotional and behavioral issues to integrate arts into their curriculum. VSA also works with the immigrant population to use arts to help develop English language skills. The organization's high school program focuses on special education students who are transitioning out of public schools and into adulthood. Adelman said VSA is working on a unique teaching model where adults with disabilities mentor special education students through the transition out of public school. The organization is actively seeking adult mentors.

VSA runs arts programs for adults with disabilities through the Howard Center as well as professional development programs for museums and public school teachers to help staff members use the arts as a tool for student inclusion.

In October, VSA will host its third annual Boom VT drum festival at the Fletcher Free Library in Burlington. It will be an opportunity for people of all abilities to make a drum, learn about drumming history and participate in a community drum circle.

The goal of the event is "to support the talents of Vermonters with disabilities through music and engage people with and without disabilities together in joyful musical celebration," the VSA website states.

More information is available at www.vsavt.org.