

VSA Vermont uses the magic of the arts to engage the capabilities and enhance the confidence of children and adults with disabilities.

The Year of the Arts

The Vermont Legislature has proclaimed 2015 as the [Year of the Arts](#), marking the 50th anniversary of the [Vermont Arts Council](#) (VAC) and giving us the opportunity to celebrate and showcase the myriad arts organizations and artists who enrich the culture of our great state. According to 2012 U.S. Census data, Vermont ranks third overall for artists as a percentage of the workforce, second for fine artists and writers, and eighth for musicians and photographers. **Judy Chalmer**, VSA Vermont's Executive Director, is a member of the VAC's 50th Anniversary Steering Committee. As an arts partner organization of VAC, VSA Vermont will be celebrating the Year of the Arts by getting the word out about our inclusive arts education programs and services. We'll keep you posted through this e-newsletter, as well as on Facebook and Twitter.



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Vermont Nonprofit Legislative Day

Judy Chalmer Gives the Devotional: A story by David French



"Thank you for beginning this session with us and with poetry."

That's **Judy Chalmer**, Executive Director of VSA Vermont, delivering the devotional at the beginning of the state legislature's deliberations on February 5. She spoke on behalf of Vermont's nonprofit community, which was meeting at the State House for the sixth annual Vermont Nonprofit Legislative Day.

"Our work in the nonprofit sector, like yours in the legislature, is of hope and hard work, of love, and of beauty."

[Common Good Vermont](#) (CGV) sponsors Legislative Day. According to **Shelagh Cooley**, Project Coordinator for CGV, it's "where we bring the entire sector together to talk about its impact – the economic impact, the social impact. This year our theme is renegotiating the social contract with the state, and funding is our big focus." At a time of fiscal stringency statewide, a creative relationship between nonprofits and state government is of vital concern to both.

“Thank you for beginning where poetry leads us, to the heart of the matter, to the heart of each person’s care, to what we share, community.”

Vermont’s 4,109 nonprofits have a huge presence in the community. And it’s not only the countless people in need of a hand who benefit. As Shelagh Cooley points out, “People don’t think of us as businesses, they think of us as charity and a handout, but actually we are creating a lot of jobs and wealth in the state through the work that we do.” Vermont nonprofits employ 44,000 people and account for 20% of all economic activity in the state. Much of what state government provides in the way of social services is carried out through nonprofits.

“To boots and jacket tumbled together, wet wool, strong coffee, strong opinions warming up kitchens and houses, to leaning in, one arm supporting another.”

For Judy Chalmer, VSA VT’s attendance at Legislative Day is a form of solidarity with other nonprofits and a way to affirm VSA VT’s particular contribution. “It’s important to show up,” she says. “To be able to support our partners in improving the lives and decreasing the risk for Vermont children, it’s just huge. And we don’t do that alone. We’re members of a sector. And we need to be here to represent the arts as an important factor in addressing the deep social needs of the state.”

“Though the way is slippery, every day reading in the faces and messages of those who trust in your care, the great work of poetry, which is, as ever, beauty and love.”

There are matters of special concern to VSA VT. Legislative Day last year focused on means of tracking the outcome of particular programs. In part as a result of the nonprofits’ support, the legislature passed Act 186, which committed government to move steadily toward results-based accountability (RBA). According to Judy, “We in VSA VT are invested in results-based accountability, and very interested in following how the legislature and the nonprofit sector make use of that tool.”

“Our own great American poet, Robert Frost, said, ‘A poem begins in delight and ends in wisdom.’ So may it be for us today.”

Just to deliver the invocation was a special moment for Judy: “In terms of VSA Vermont, I was so pleased to be asked by Common Good to give the devotional. To me, it’s a sign that we’re recognized as being an important partner in the nonprofit world,” and that world’s poetry, love, and beauty.

Our VSA Volunteers

A story by David French

A special role is played by VSA VT’s volunteer interns. Most often, these are students in local universities for whom an internship is part of their academic program. VSA VT matches its needs and opportunities with the students’ strengths, which might be communications techniques, social work, graphic arts, marketing, or other skills. Heidi Pfau, who coordinates VSA VT’s volunteer program, says, “The internships provide an opportunity for people to have their textbooks come alive through the activities VSA VT is engaged in.”

Internships normally last an academic semester. During this time, according to Pfau, interns learn about their field of study, themselves, and the intersection of arts and disability. They also make a major contribution to VSA VT. How this works can be seen in the stories of VSA VT’s current interns, Shelby Dickinson and Stephanie Thomas.

“I always knew I wanted to work with people.”

That’s what led **Shelby Dickinson** to her current role as an intern for VSA Vermont, though it was a long journey. For seven summers during her schooldays, she had worked at a camp in New Hampshire for people with intellectual disabilities. As college and career choices grew nearer, she played with the idea of becoming a pediatrician or a therapist.



Then someone suggested that the quickest way to be in a helping profession is to get a credential in social work. She found her way from her home in central Massachusetts to Champlain College, where on May 9 she’ll receive her bachelor’s degree in social work, along with a B.S. in psychology.

One requirement for the B.S.W. at Champlain College is an eight-month internship, and VSA VT proved the perfect place for it. According to Shelby, “I thought VSA VT would be a way to revisit my camp experience that got me passionate about going into social services, and to integrate my love for creativity. And I would get a bird’s-eye view of how an organization works.”

Most recently, Shelby has been assisting VSA VT’s **Toby MacNutt** in support of the Bridging Program, a collaboration between five Chittenden County high schools. “It’s a program for students with disabilities who are about to graduate, helping them become self-advocates and gain independence,” Shelby explains. During the second half of the yearlong program, VSA VT makes weekly visits to build these skills through arts activities. Shelby makes sure the room is ready, participates in the class, takes photos of what goes on, and works with Toby to assess what happens.

Shelby calls this “shadowing” a class. Since August, she has also been shadowing a series of classes in VSA VT’s Adult Arts Program. VSA VT teaching-artists lead adults attending these classes in drumming, fiber arts, singing, print-making, and other activities. As a representative from VSA VT who has been present for the entire five months, Shelby provides a kind of continuity to which participants can relate.

One of Shelby’s particular interests in both programs has been to help track, class by class, what she describes as “the moments where students are learning a new skill or feeling like they have gained a different kind of confidence.” Heidi Pfau calls these “the celebrations, the sparkles” that can arise in a class.

Shelby describes one sparkle this way: “I recorded students in a drumming class. We would ask them what they liked about it, and they spontaneously would do a little drumming solo. I was anticipating just doing a video of them talking to me, and a lot of them were like no, I’m going to play the drums!” VSA VT has been experimenting with various ways to observe and record such moments, and Shelby is an enthusiastic contributor to the experiment.

By next year, Shelby expects to have earned a master’s degree in social work from a Boston-area university. A certificate in expressive arts therapy might follow. Her psychology internship at Champlain College was at Burlington’s Converse Home, an assisted-living community; and the work there was sufficiently compelling that she would ultimately like to work with older adults in geriatric care. Whatever the final outcome, she’ll still be in the social service field.



Stephanie Thomas grew up in Vermont, but along the way became a traveler. She got to Spain for three weeks when she was 17, and that was just the beginning. Following her graduation in 2014 from the University of Vermont, she spent five months working her way across South America, taking 30-hour bus rides between Ecuador, Peru, Chile, Argentina, and Brazil.

Fortunately for VSA Vermont, Stephanie decided to stay near Burlington for a time on her return from South America. She was looking for an organization with a social mission and found an internship at VSA VT through UVM's Catamount Job Link. Stephanie had majored in business administration at UVM with a concentration in marketing, skills that led to becoming VSA VT's Communications Assistant. Starting in January, she began identifying events and programs of interest to VSA for emails, Facebook, Twitter, and newsletters.

Stephanie has also been helping in **Leslie Freeman's** "Every Body Can Dance" course at Burlington's Howard Resource Center. Each week, people with various disabilities gather to engage in everything from free dance to wheelchair yoga, moving to hip-hop, country music, rock and roll, or jazz. Studies have shown that dance may increase motor and communication skills and enhance memory and cognitive functioning. Those may be among the outcomes of Leslie's course, but it's not the main reason people are there. According to Stephanie, the students come simply because they or their support workers see it as a chance to move, an alternative to just sitting and talking.

Stephanie provides tech support, demonstrates alternate ways of performing movements, and helps the group stay on track. At the end of each session, Leslie solicits feedback from the participants as to their experience in the class with "rose" (things that went well) and "thorn" (things that didn't go so well). Stephanie sets an example for the class by offering her own answers. For Stephanie, it's an imaginative variant of the kinds of market research she studied in her business courses, a way to find out how people are responding to what they're offered in order to make it better for them.

In her more strictly communications role, Stephanie has been getting the word out about a wide range of VSA VT-related activities. In early February, for example, she helped promote a free concert at the Shelburne Vineyard, some of the proceeds from which were donated to VSA VT. Also in February, she called attention to a production at the Flynn Center of "Schoolhouse Rock Live" that was "sensory-friendly," taking account of the needs of children for whom too much sensory input can be overwhelming. And she's been alerting people to National AMD (age-related macular degeneration)/Low Vision Awareness Month in February and to the 25th anniversary of the Americans with Disabilities Act in July.

For the time being, you can also find Stephanie in Burlington at the Vermont Pub and Brewery. The traveler in Stephanie will keep her moving on, though. When summer comes to Vermont this year, she'll get in her car and drive to Bellingham, Washington, where she'll next come to rest.



A Night at the Shelburne Vineyard

A story by David French

VSA VT staff and volunteers joined several dozen people for an evening of fine music, food, and company at the Shelburne Vineyard on February 5. **Patrick Fitzsimmons** performed as part of the Shelburne Vineyard's First Thursdays free concert series, with a portion of the proceeds from beverage sales going to VSA Vermont. Between sets, **Heidi Pfau**, Volunteer and Adult Program Coordinator, shared a few words about VSA VT's mission and programs. Then she introduced **Marjorie Burns**, someone with first-hand experience of VSA VT's adult art classes through a partnership with the HowardCenter:



"Hi. My name is Marjorie Burns, and I took several of the VSA VT classes. I really enjoyed the pottery class because I liked doing different things with the wheel. I learned about putting it in the fire. I thought it all dried in the air."

"And I volunteered at BOOM (VSA VT's annual drum festival). I helped people out at the end. I really enjoyed the people."

"I would do it again."

"Thank you."

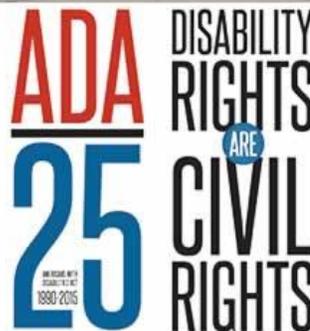
Marjorie enjoyed her evening at the Vineyard as well, notably the music. Fitzsimmons is a local, award-winning singer-songwriter whose songs range from pop and folk anthems to love ballads. In 2012, he released his sixth album, whose title, "Hope Is," was inspired by Emily Dickinson's poem "Hope is the Thing With Feathers." *Relix Magazine* has called him "one of the most captivating songwriters around today."

The Shelburne Vineyard was named Best Vermont Winery by *Seven Days* in 2011, 2012, and 2014. They use grapes grown on 17 acres in Shelburne, Charlotte, and Vergennes to create reds, whites, and dessert wines. They have a tasting room in their center at 6308 Shelburne Road where people can sample their award-winning products.



News You Can Use:

25th Anniversary: The Americans with Disabilities Act is celebrating its 25th anniversary in July 2015. The ADA is a civil rights law that prohibits discrimination against individuals with disabilities in all areas of public life. The purpose of the law is to make sure that people with disabilities have the same rights and opportunities as everyone else. To celebrate the anniversary, the ADA has embarked on a Legacy Tour, traveling across the country raising awareness and building excitement. They will promote the theme "Disability Rights are Civil Rights" by preserving the history of the disability rights movement, celebrating its milestones, and educating the public and future generations. For more information on the ADA, the Legacy Tour, and to pledge to recommit to full implementation of the ADA, visit <http://www.adaanniversary.org/>



PayPal: We've switched to PayPal for those of you who would like to make online donations to VSA Vermont. Why? Because more of your money will come directly to us, supporting our inclusive educational programs and services. When you click on the Donate online link below, you'll be taken to the PayPal site where you can use any of your credit cards.



VSA Webinars: Did you know that you can register for and participate in VSA Webinars? The next webinar, entitled Teaching Students with Disabilities with Limited Resources: Paper Engineering, is scheduled for March 24th from 3 to 4 PM EDT. The presenter is **Kim McCormack**, founder of Creative Curiosity Inc. and an education consultant and multi-media artist. Kim has been an advocate for the field of arts in education for over 30 years, helping students of all ages and all abilities become successful learners and develop creative and critical thinking skills. She designs and implements innovative, hands-on arts integration projects with unique ways to engage learning. You can register for this webinar at: <https://attendee.gotowebinar.com/register/200000000028422945>. For more information about VSA webinars, go to this

webpage: <http://www.kennedy-center.org/education/vsa/resources/webinars.cfm>

March Legislative Days: On Wednesday, March 11th from 9 AM to 3 PM, [Vermont's Early Childhood Alliance](http://www.vermontearlychildhoodalliance.org) is hosting Early Childhood Day at the Legislature. On this day, you can network and exchange information about the needs of and accomplishments made in early childhood in Vermont. For more information or to register, go to www.vermontearlychildhoodalliance.org.

On March 18th from 9 AM to 6:30 PM, [Vermont's Coalition for Disability Rights](http://www.vermontcoalitionfordisabilityrights.org) is hosting Disability Awareness Day at the Statehouse. The theme is Disability Milestones: Progress Made, Miles to Go. To make a request for a reasonable accommodation, please contact Stefanie Monte at 1-800-639-1522 or smonte@vcil.org.



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The Woolen Mill
20 W. Canal St.
Winooski, Vermont 05404
US



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