

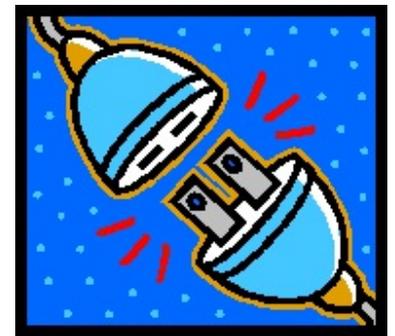


August 12, 2014

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

## Making Connections through the Arts

What do artists do? They naturally seek out connections. Their souls yearn to find the thousand of complementary threads that exist between people, ideas, and objects—linking the fibers into a single garment. In the August VSA Vermont newsletter, we will focus on individuals who strive to make our big impersonal world into more of a community. Acting compassionately is instinctual to them, for each has felt like an outsider. As artists, they have discovered two important lessons: that everything is interrelated and that the quality of our lives and work is based on the quality and quantity of our connections.



[Melinda White-Bronson](#) | [Sarah Kulig](#) | [David French](#) | [News You Can Use](#)



### Melinda White-Bronson: Teaching-Artist

#### *Connecting to creativity*

As a VSA Vermont teaching-artist and sculptor, Melinda White-Bronson understands the importance of connecting to her creative and nurturing instincts. As the child of a doctor father and nurse mother, she was often involved in their work. When her dad oversaw a polio ward in a Chicago hospital, she often visited with his patients. She remembers that one patient in an iron lung loved to paint. The patient could hold a brush, but she was too weak to move her arm from paint pallet to canvas; the staff jerry-rigged a sling to an IV



pole to assist with her artwork. The patient made a fabulous portrait of her and her sister. The concept of “creative adaptation”—making things and ideas work for people of all abilities levels—was planted in Melinda early on and would never be far from her artwork or her teaching.

When Melinda was 12 years old, her family moved to Kampala, Uganda. It was in Africa that Melinda experienced being “the other.” She was exposed to a rich mix of cultural influences; to dignity, beauty, and love without material wealth; and to an eagerness for knowledge. Melinda finished high school in the U.S., choosing a nursing major at the University of Pennsylvania. Halfway through her undergraduate degree, Melinda married and moved to St. Louis with her husband, finishing her degree in Missouri. For electives, Melinda took studio art classes. By her senior year, she recognized that she was a fish out of water, more interested in art than in nursing. She promised herself time to make art if she just finished her nursing degree. She got exactly 9 months of art-making (and two more moves) before her first son was born.



Motherhood was bliss; postpartum depression was a nightmare after both child one and child two. Melinda, with the help of a counselor, realized that getting back to art might be just the ticket; not only was it therapeutic, but also changed the direction of her life. When the family moved to a sheep farm in Vermont, she slowly pursued degrees in studio art and art therapy. As Melinda says, “I have always been both a creator and a nurturer. I enjoy the diversity of my life roles: homemaker, parent, farmer, artist, art student, teacher.”



Melinda has held art workshops for all ages and in a variety of settings, from recreational facilities to schools to churches. In Morrisville, at the Out and About Center, a program for older adults with disabilities, Melinda was the artist-in-residence. It was there that she first met Judy Chalmer who was teaching a writing class. When Judy became Executive Director of VSA Vermont, she contacted Melinda to see if

she might be interested in becoming a VSA VT teaching-artist. Melinda has taught in almost every VSA VT arts education program that we offer.



How does Melinda make her art classes work for so many different age groups and ability levels. She connects her classes to themes; age-appropriate art pedagogy lends her the structure. For example, in a themed course on “painting your way to a tropical vacation,” Melinda brought in educational information about places, composition, brush techniques, color, etc. She intuitively understands that information must be presented in many ways, giving students multiple methods for interacting with materials and demonstrating what they have learned.

For a number of years, Melinda has been a teaching-artist at the Integrated Arts Academy (I.A.A.) and was pivotal in the initial stages of our Universal Design for Learning (U.D.L.) collaborative project\*\* with arts organizations, teaching-artists in training, and I.A.A. staff. In fact, she presented on Arts Integration and U.D.L. at the first VSA Intersections Conference on arts and special education in Washington, D.C. in August of 2013.

Melinda believes that “VSA is the joy way, helping people of all abilities experience their humanity and express themselves.” She’d love you to get involved in VSA VT’s creative joy; it’ll nurture your soul.

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## **Sarah Kulig: Board Member**

### ***Connecting to people***

Board Member Sarah Kulig was first introduced to VSA Vermont through Melinda White-Bronson who “couldn’t stop talking about this wonderful organization called VSA Vermont.” Sarah was new to Burlington at the time, having moved here when she graduated from Smith College in Massachusetts with a degree in art. As a newbie, she knew she’d have to meet people



and make connections. So Sarah picked up the phone and called Judy Chalmer which led to a year of volunteering at VSA VT, working on grants, editing proposals, and organizing spreadsheets.

The next year, VSA VT created a VISTA position; Sarah applied and was hired. Through the excellent mentoring of Judy Chalmer, Melinda White-Bronson, and Gwendolyn Evans; Sarah gained not only administrative skills, but also invaluable teaching experience, assisting others and offering her own creative writing course at the Boys and Girls Club. Sarah thrived in the classroom and “in the midst of the creative process between teachers and students.” Childhood dreams were reactivated.



When Sarah was 12 years old, she remembers finding a book on “Understanding Children’s Drawing” in the public library. The book was about art therapy; it occurred to Sarah that she loved art and she really enjoyed helping people. Art therapy connected her two passions. After 2 years in Burlington, the timing seemed right to pursue her dream and get that degree. She chose Lesley University in Cambridge, MA.

When she graduated, she once again returned to Burlington and the many people and connections she made here. Her art therapy position working with adolescents and their families at Centerpoint Adolescent Treatment Services in South Burlington is all that she dreamed of those many years ago. She gets to develop “awesome relationships with her clients, helping them see their strengths.” As she says, “there are a million moments everyday when I can use art in concrete, non-academic ways in the community. VSA VT supported me in seeing how art can help everyone be as fully human as possible.”



It’s a part of Sarah’s nature to stay in touch with people. When Judy Chalmer and Andy Perkins invited her to serve on the VSA VT Board of Directors in the spring, she was ready and willing. When asked what she brings to the Board, Sarah quickly answers “my team building skills.” Too many boards are composed



of busy people who are not connected and who don't know each other, but need to work together for the organization. Sarah wants to focus on board health and well-being issues, creating a strong and cohesive group.



Sarah has a busy life. She planted her first garden this year and is a Zumba instructor. Besides working on her own art, she reads, bikes, and takes care of her rescue dog from Puerto Rico. Sarah may have moved to Burlington on a “wing and a prayer,” but she has established deep roots here and strong connections to so many people!



## David French: Volunteer Storyteller

### *Connecting to stories*

David French, VSA Vermont's newest volunteer and a long time donor, spent most of his adult life outside of the United States. In 1999, he retired from a career that took him across the globe, living and working in Italy, Malawi, Ireland, Pakistan, Ethiopia, Angola, Nigeria, New Zealand, and Eritrea.

With a Ph.D. in Political Economy from Harvard University, David worked as a development consultant, energy advisor, and project director for a variety of international organizations, including the U.N. World Food Program, World Bank, Food and Agricultural Organization of the U.N., and more. As David says, “I wanted to be useful to people and lend a hand to those in trouble.” The many years overseas helped David gain an acute view of what so many of us take for granted.



He first heard about VSA Vermont and the Awareness Theater Project when he moved to Shelburne in 2006. He wanted to find out more about theater with and for people with disabilities. A second connection was established with Patricia Fontaine, VSA VT Board Member Emerita. Patricia and David happened to belong to the same local Buddhist group. The third contact was with Judy Chalmer who met with

David to find out if he might like to be more deeply involved in VSA VT's work.

David is a writer and has published books and articles over the years. He's deeply motivated to tell stories about interesting people doing exciting work. VSA VT was in need of someone who wanted to write about our programs in a way that was alive and human. A match was born. After completing the volunteer application process, David set out to attend youth and adult arts education programs. At each session, he observes, take pictures, interviews participants and teaching-artists, and writes a story.

Each of David's stories paints a picture of the extraordinary people who are involved as our teaching-artists and participants. "It's the small details that are so moving," says David. "Watching someone who has difficulty relating to others being drawn into an art activity. VSA VT programs enable people to step out of their usual routines and relate to the world in new ways." For David, this means he gets to take that acute view, getting the opportunity to understand how someone else experiences the world.

Every year, David spends a month in a retreat. "It's a chance to explore what is really going on around you and in you, to relax and make yourself more likely to bring healing to the world." We'll be publishing David's stories of arts exploration and healing in our newsletters and on Facebook in the coming months. You can read the first one—"Messing with Mud"—below.



### ***Messing with Mud***

Take a blob of wet clay looking like an uncooked burger (or a giant mushy M&M), splat it onto a potter's wheel, and...almost anything can happen next.

That's what seven school kids discovered through a weeklong class with master potter Ara Cardew (*pictured at left*), a VSA Vermont teaching-artist at the Upper Valley Haven in White River Junction. All seven had lived in the Haven's shelter for the temporarily homeless, and continue to participate in programs there



after moving back into homes of their own.

Rik Rolla, a Shelburne-based potter who has worked with children for years, says that “Kids love to touch clay—they’re like moths to a flame with it.” Participants in the Haven program had other motivations as well. Travis\*, for example, wanted to try pottery “because I was wondering how they made the stuff like the Egyptian artifacts they find, or like the jars, or like in Pompeii.” As the group made pottery of their own, “We sort of explained it a tiny bit.”



Like everyone, Travis made a fish and a pig, along with other creations (*pictured at left*).

Allison’s\* reason to do the course was a bit different. She likes to sing, draw, and paint, and says “I also wanted to try pottery because I’ve never done it before—I’m always trying to do new art things. A lot of people say I have a creative side, and I wanted to work on that more.” Her creative side emerges most vividly in the bright colors of her glazes (*pictured at left*).



Joe\* had made pottery at school before and thought it would be fun to try again. Take a look at his version of an elephant with a scrunched-up trunk (*pictured at below left*).

As everyone knows who has tried to “throw a pot,” even centering the clay on the pottery wheel can be a challenge. Fortunately, Ara was always there. According to Travis, “He was funny and would mess around with us a little bit, but whenever we’d mess up on something, he would come and help us.”

When the week was over, the participants staged a show of their work for friends and families, explaining the techniques they’d used to create their pieces. According to Janine Moretti, the Children’s Services Associate at the Haven who supervised the pottery program, “It was great to see them showing pride in what they did. It was a new outlet for them, something they wouldn’t have been able to do if it hadn’t been for the support provided by VSA Vermont and the Upper Valley Haven.”

It wasn’t just the ceramic pigs and pots that

mattered at the end; it was the chance to maintain a link with the Haven, which had provided the kids with opportunities in many forms over the years. “We’re something that’s very consistent in their lives,” says Janine, “and that’s important. We’re a good support.” It’s the kind of support VSA Vermont tries to provide through its programs for children with disabilities or disadvantages throughout the state.

Perhaps the last word should go to Joe. What he had to say about Ara Cardew reflected what all the participants seemed to feel about their week of pottery: “Bloody marvelous!!”

*\*Children’s names have been changed at their request.*

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## News you can use

**Volunteer Opportunity:** VSA Vermont is looking for a volunteer to serve as the BOOM VT drum festival Kitchen Coordinator. Join our volunteer team for the October 18th event at the Elley-Long Music Center at Saint Michaels College in Colchester. You’ll oversee a great group of volunteers as we serve food from 11 AM to 3 PM. Catering/food service experience would be helpful. You can learn more about this and other volunteer opportunities by contacting Heidi Pfau, VSA VT’s Volunteer Coordinator, at [heidi@vsavt.org](mailto:heidi@vsavt.org) or [802.238.5170](tel:802.238.5170).



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