

Program Connects Mentors And Students With Disabilities

By **CHRISTOPHER ROY**
Express Staff Writer

VSA Vermont, the State Organization of Arts and Disability, matches high school students with adult mentors. For now, the mentor program has services in Chittenden and Washington counties, but it would like to hear from those who feel the program would benefit their communities. The mentor program is new for VSA Vermont. It arose during performance arts classroom work with high school students.

"We heard from our alumni that they had a wonderful time in our classes," said Toby MacNutt, program manager for

VSA Vermont's high school program. Many of the students who wrote to the organization wanted to know what they should do after graduation and no longer had access to the programs. "We looked at this problem and said these people have needs that clearly aren't being met."

VSA Vermont started a mentoring program, now in its second year so that high school students with disabilities can be matched with an adult mentor who has a disability MacNutt said.

"They do art together during the

school year," MacNutt said. "That way, the students have a chance to meet someone who can be a role model for them, someone who understands where they are in life and what they're doing and have a chance to connect to their local arts organizations prior to graduation. After they graduate, they already have a little bit of a social network in the adult world and they have art opportunities."

The students work in art of all types. This year, MacNutt has

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mentors who are architects, a musician, someone who enjoys arts and crafts, poets and dancers.

"They do all kinds of things," MacNutt said. "Whatever they're interested in."

VSA Vermont has about ten program participants, MacNutt said. Private donors, foundations, and competitive government grants fund the program, he said. There is no cost for schools, students, mentors, or families.

"Any student who has an Individual Education Plan must have a transition plan, which is a plan for how that student is going to leave school in a supported and safe way," MacNutt said. "Being able to meet people in the community, practice the skills of traveling in the community, and generate a support network are all things that can be helpful in a student's transition plan."

The organization will support students if they reach the required high school exit age of 22 during the school year.