

Two Amazing VSA Vermonters

Like many nonprofit organizations, VSA Vermont is made up of people. In our case, we lay claim to a number of extraordinary individuals with passion, commitment, and big hearts. VSA Vermont's prolific volunteer storyteller, David French, has written articles about two of them: Kim Desjardins and Sarah Kulig. Take a few minutes to meet these two VSA Vermont volunteers through David's stories.



Kim Desjardins: Arts Connect Graduate and Teaching-Artist

Kim Desjardins depends on Google Calendar to keep track of a busy and ever-changing schedule. At the moment, she teaches half-time at Hiawatha Elementary School in Essex Junction, works at the Family Literacy Center in Barre with teenagers who are pregnant or parenting, designs sets for an upcoming production of the children's opera Brundibar, and guides people through exhibits at Burlington City Arts (BCA). Last year, she also

brought arts to a first-grade class at Burlington's Integrated Arts Academy. Next year... who knows?

One common denominator in this complex professional life is the skill set Kim acquired in the fall of 2013 through Arts Connect, a multi-partner program in which VSA Vermont is the lead agency. Arts Connect trains artists to bring their talents into classrooms, working with teachers to integrate art into the standard curriculum.

According to Kim, it is through the process of making art that concepts in science, literacy and math can be more deeply understood. At the same time, children's understanding of art is strengthened. To take an example from her own experience as a teacher, students learned about the phases of the moon through printmaking, and learned about printmaking by using this to show the phases of the moon. Learning is boosted both in the arts and through the arts.

For Kim, Arts Connect builds on years of experience bringing art to children. After her graduation from the University of Vermont in 2001, she moved to Maine, where she spent eight years bringing “Art on a Cart” to various schools. When she returned to Vermont in 2010, she spent three years as a paraeducator in Essex Middle School, working in part with children with cognitive or behavioral challenges. She was also a Personal Care Attendant for children on the autism spectrum.



In 2013, Kim landed a half-time art teaching position at Hiawatha and was active as a teaching artist for BCA. The education director at BCA encouraged her to apply to be part of Arts Connect, and to Kim it seemed perfect timing. She was looking for a way to be more open and student-centered in her instruction.

Central to the Arts Connect philosophy is an approach called Universal Design for Learning (UDL). UDL uses insights from neuroscience to lay out the diverse ways in which children take in information, process it, and then express what they’ve discovered. According to Kim, “For me, Arts Connect and UDL are a reminder to be flexible. I feel I’m more gentle in terms of not trying to fit a round peg in a square hole or a square peg in a round hole.”

To show how this works, Kim explains, “Say there’s a student who doesn’t have the attention space to sit for a long time. I try to cut down on the time they have to sit. I also think of ways to help that student preemptively before they get up and create distractions.” One way is to use a visual timer that shows how many minutes remain for a given phase of a class project. It helps the “wiggly” student to see that the clock is ticking down to the moment when they will no longer have to sit. True to UDL principles, this adaption, though created for one or two students, ends up benefiting many others.

In general, says Kim, “I feel through Arts Connect I have become more open and see more across disciplines.” This ability to draw connection between disciplines is an important aspect of the Arts Connect program. For example, before entering the program, Kim would have had her second graders at the Hiawatha School simply sculpt faces as an arts project. Now, she says, she has her students think about what their faces look like when they’re feeling a certain emotion. They then pose and act emotions out, and finally show expressions with mixed media. When the students share, they talk about what emotions they see in the images. Art has crossed curricular lines to become a way to develop emotional intelligence, in line with an emotional regulation program the school has adopted.

In August 2015, a six-person delegation from Vermont traveled to Arlington, Virginia, for a national “VSA Intersections” conference sponsored by the Kennedy Center, which oversees the international network of VSA organizations. There were several hundred attendees, including administrators, special educators, and teachers of drama, arts, and music. As the BCA representative on the delegation, Kim gave a presentation, “Universal Design for Learning and Arts Integration,” on what she had learned and created as a result of Arts Connect.



Kim says, “Through Arts Connect, I feel like I’ve branched out in a lot of new ways and met lots of people.” It contributes to a rich and varied life. “Sometimes, when I’m dragging things in and out of my car all the time, I think I might want something more full-time in one place. But deep down, having such varied experience is exciting, and I think I become a better teacher that way.”

The range of Kim’s teaching is mirrored in the range of her own art, which includes

printmaking, mixed media, painting, set design, clay and (as a new exploration, alongside her students in Barre) mosaics. As is the case with her work, Kim sometimes wonders about limiting her options: “I’ve always thought, oh, I want a cohesive body of work – that’s what real artists have, right? But I am a real artist, even if I have a million things.”

Where might it all be going for Kim? “It seems for me there’s kind of a six-month rotation to what I’m doing,” she says. “It’s always teaching art, but things kind of come and go.” Perhaps there’s no need to know more than that. At the Arlington conference in August, another member of the Vermont delegation concluded her presentation with a quote from Rainer Maria Rilke’s “Letter to a Young Poet”: when it comes to questions about what’s coming, “Don’t search for the answers... Perhaps, someday far in the future, you will gradually, without even noticing it, live your way into the answer.” Kim continues to live her way into answers day by day.

Sarah Kulig: VSA VT Board President

Browsing in a small-town New Hampshire library when she was 13, Sarah Kulig came upon a book by Cathy Malchiodi called “Understanding Children’s Drawings.” Malchiodi wrote about ways in which therapists could integrate art into their work with children. For Sarah, it was a revelation: “I’d always loved art, but I’d think, what would I want to do with that? I had an innate helping nature and loved being involved with people very directly. I felt, oh, art therapy, that could combine both the helping and the art together.”



It’s not entirely a stretch to say that reading Malchiodi eventually led Sarah to her present position as President of VSA Vermont’s Board of Directors. There were some steps along the way, though. Throughout undergraduate studies at Smith College (with a semester abroad at the Glasgow School of Art), a grounding in studio arts took center stage.

In those days, Sarah’s own art concentrated on traditional forms like charcoal drawing and still life. She began opening to new techniques, however. “I like being impacted by the experiences I’m having,” she says, “seeing my art change over time.” These days she’s working with collage and “altered books,” an art form that might, for example, place images

from childhood into an old atlas. Some of her work appeared in a show sponsored by the Art Therapy Association of Vermont in summer of 2015.

With no clear idea of what to do after receiving her B.A. in 2009, she found her way to Vermont, following a friend who was entering graduate school at UVM. Through one of VSA's teaching artists, Sarah was introduced to Judy Chalmer, VSA VT's Executive Director. For Sarah, "VSA VT seemed a bridge into ways to use art to influence the world around you in addition to the act of making art. Art can be a community-building tool, a way to connect in a really direct way, not just looking at your art but making art together. I thought, that seems appealing!"



Sarah first became a volunteer with VSA VT and then arranged a yearlong internship through AmeriCorps VISTA, writing grants and helping out with VSA's classes. The seed planted by reading Malchiodi had begun to bloom: "As an undergraduate, I had kind of focused on the art, and then afterwards thought, okay, maybe it's time to check out the art therapy piece." In 2011, she enrolled in an M.A. course in art therapy and mental health counseling at Lesley University.

While at Lesley, Sarah had internships in the memory support wing of an assisted living facility and with an agency assisting survivors of domestic violence. On her return to Vermont in 2013, she first worked at Howard Center, helping children who were on the edge of hospitalization for serious mental health challenges. In February 2014, she took on a job at the outpatient clinic of Centerpoint Services, providing art therapy to adolescents and their families.

In March 2014, Sarah returned to VSA VT as a member of its Board of Directors. In September 2015 she became the Board's president, bringing to the job her experience with art therapy. For Sarah, art therapy always comes back to providing what she calls "a space to play. That's what we do as kids. It's what gives us the connections to imagine possibilities. When we don't have that, we get really stuck. We need opportunities to open up more space to consider alternatives, not just in a cognitive way but in an emotional way." It sounds a lot like the spirit that motivates VSA VT.

The opening of playful space is at the heart of the activities to which Sarah is giving particular attention as President of the VSA VT Board:

- A new mentoring program to match high school students with disabilities and adult artists with disabilities, providing the students with points of entry into Vermont's arts community.
- Expansion of VSA's Start With The Arts program for pre-schoolers, helping childcare providers include the children's families as they add arts to their offerings.
- In her graduate internship at a memory care unit, Sarah found that "it is a kind of magic to see people who are sort of removed from life come alive when given music or art, the type of experience that elicits a response in a beautiful way." She looks forward to VSA VT becoming involved in this way with elders with dementia.
- Expansion of VSA VT's involvement with the Baird School, where teaching artists work with children with behavioral challenges.

Sarah gives great importance to what VSA VT has learned through the Baird School and other programs about how to assess the results of what it does. At the Baird School, for example, artists' logs and teacher observations track the extent to which introducing the arts keeps children in the classroom, interacting with each other in positive ways. "It's a really good example," she says, "of how VSA VT seeks to be sure that what we're doing matters and to measure its impact." She envisions even greater use of techniques like results-based accountability to track the outcome of VSA VT programs.



As for her own future, Sarah says, "I feel like the opportunity to be a Board president for VSA VT is really rich, and I want to give that space and time to develop. My hope is to just continue to respond to what's around me, to follow some of the threads that life has been offering."

To VSA VT's good fortune, she has created a space for herself within which to play, with all that implies in terms of creativity and service.

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