

A MATTER OF PERSPECTIVE: THE ART OF ACCESS

By Jeffrey Symes
One Sky

Barbara Albert's art students were gathered in a common room at Betty's Dream, the accessible apartment complex in Portsmouth. There were artists using wheelchairs. And artists who didn't talk. But all the faces were full of expectation and they were focused on Albert, intent on what they were about to do - work on their art with hopes to learn and improve what they could do. As to the work of these artists with disabilities, Albert quickly realized what many people with disabilities confront on a daily basis.

Disability isn't always present in the individual - in fact, it may not appear at all until it's drawn out through what surrounds them. Disability can come to light in the lack of access to a building; when a customer who uses a wheelchair is disabled by the lack of a ramp and can't enter. It can appear in the hiring process; when a qualified job applicant with autism and social challenges can't get past a job screening on the phone, or the face-to-face interview where keeping eye contact is expected.

It's known as the social model of disability, and it puts the onus of disability on the structures of society; whether in the form of physical obstacles, or prejudiced norms and rules, or simply attitudes of individuals that hinder people with disabilities from participating and achieving at their full capacity.

Turning that model around, the New Hampshire Art Association and One Sky Community Services of Portsmouth teamed up to make art accessible to everyone who was interested - bar none. The art students taking part in the five-week workshop receive services through One Sky.

The group Albert instructed was comprised of artists she recognized as talented, but who didn't always have the right tools to use to create their art. Like the painter who used a brush rigged onto his ballcap and how he struggled to keep the brush in place. Or when transportation became an issue, as it can be every day for so many people with disabilities, preventing them from reaching communities and making vital



A FIVE-WEEK WORKSHOP FOR ARTISTS WITH DISABILITIES TAUGHT BY BARBARA ALBERT AT BETTY'S DREAM IN PORTSMOUTH GREW OUT OF AN EXHIBIT SPONSORED BY THE NEW HAMPSHIRE ART ASSOCIATION AND ONE SKY COMMUNITY SERVICES.

connections to others.

"I realized how challenging the environment and activities that I take for granted can be for people with disabilities," says Albert, an NHAA board member. Though she had no prior experience working with people who have disabilities, the 75-year old artist was eager to put into practice her belief that anyone can be an artist. And she was tested right away - not by any person, but by the tools of her trade.

"The biggest challenge was to adapt art tools to meet student needs," says Albert. "But they helped each other and showed me how to adapt. I learned more from them than they did from me. Their willingness to experiment with materials and techniques was energizing. They kept trying when things turned out differently than they expected."

The workshop was not the first time the NHAA and One Sky teamed up. Last year, the two organizations sponsored an art exhibit at the Robert Lincoln Levy Gallery in Portsmouth entitled, "Looking Beyond Disability." The featured artists all received services

through One Sky.

The exhibit was the brainchild of Portsmouth artist Billie Tooley, who also happens to be a former executive director of the NHAA and is the current Director of Development and Outreach for One Sky Services. But it was her background as a working artist that gave Tooley insight into the positive effects of creating art that a non-artist might not understand.

"It was becoming clear to me that we had artists among the people we serve at One Sky," says Tooley. "And I understood the value of art in someone's life. Art validates their self-worth and you can't put a price on that. We're slowly finding more artists among the people we serve and we want to reach out to people who maybe haven't tried art before. It's a way of expressing your life."

The exhibit was such a success that it provided the seeds for the workshop. Albert volunteered as an instructor because she had attended the exhibit and was impressed by what she saw. But she was also disappointed by one aspect of the exhibit - most of

the pieces on display were not for sale. She came to understand that the work was precious to the artists who had created it, that it was something they were proud to show, but that parting with the work was an entirely different and unacceptable idea.

Until this year.

A few of the artists in the workshop were among the dozen One Sky artists featured in the second "Looking Beyond" exhibit that closed at the Lincoln Levy gallery late last month. Persuaded that their effort and their talent had a value in the real world that should be compensated, and that their earnings could go toward buying themselves new art supplies, the artists all offered their works up for purchase. Or, as another collection of artists, the U.S. group of the Mouth and Foot Painting Artists Association, urges in its motto: "Self-help - Not Charity."

Installed and displayed in a larger space and with more artists participating than last year, the exhibit was still nearly sold out by the time it closed. "It's a win-win situation for everyone involved," says Tooley. "Part of our mission at One Sky is to foster inclusion and talk about developmental disabilities."

Talk about disabilities and supports today revolves increasingly around the idea not of dependence or even independence, but around interdependence, and how every person, with disabilities or not, relies on others. It's a lesson Albert learned from her students. "The learning was shared," she says. "They learned from watching each other. And they didn't give up. People helped each other succeed."



Incorporated in 1983, One Sky Community Services has been dedicated to providing a comprehensive array of services, supports and programs to individuals and families with intellectual and developmental disabilities, as well as acquired brain disorders. A private 5013C nonprofit organization, it is the designated area agency serving the following communities: Brentwood, Deerfield, East Kingston, Epping, Exeter, Fremont, Greenland, Hampton, Hampton Falls, Kensington, Kingston, New Castle, Newfields, Newington, Newmarket, North Hampton, Northwood, Nottingham, Portsmouth, Raymond, Rye, Seabrook, South Hampton and Stratham. One Sky works with nearly 1,200 individuals and families on a yearly basis.