



## art with a purpose

VSA Arts of Alabama promotes the artistic expression of people with disabilities.

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PHOTOS BY JASON WALLIS

Sometimes a photograph, not words, best tells a story.

Sherri Van Pelt, executive director of VSA Arts of Alabama, has such a picture. It's of a girl named Hanna—likely little more than six years old—covered in blue and purple paint. She is completely intent on her task at hand. Hanna's face illustrates why Van Pelt bubbles over with enthusiasm when talking about her work and the organization. "When I tell people what I do, I say I have the best job in the world," she says.

Van Pelt has served as VSA Arts of Alabama's executive director for two years. Her background is as an occupational therapist, though she recently left her practice to devote her efforts to VSA Arts fulltime. Formerly Very Special Arts, today, the acronym stands for Vision, Strength and Artistic expression. The organization's purpose is to promote the arts for people with disabilities. "We do for the arts what Special Olympics does for athletics," she explains.

Jean Kennedy Smith (sister to former President John F. Kennedy, Robert Kennedy, and Massachusetts Senator Ted Kennedy) founded VSA Arts national in 1974 as an affiliate of the John F. Kennedy Center for the Performing Arts. Today, affiliates in 49 states and international affiliates in 60 countries promote artistic excellence and provide educational opportunities through the arts for more than 5.5 million people with disabilities.

Since 1984, the Alabama affiliate has sought to show the power of the arts to achieve personal growth through programs such as arts camps for children as well as Creativity, a juried exhibit for artists with disabilities. There is also a new program called Art Partners that pairs children who have disabilities with artists to work collaboratively on a piece of artwork. It lights up the faces of children like Hanna. "To see that kind of light come into her eyes...is very rewarding," says Charlotte Holder, an artist and board member of VSA Arts.

Holder is the artist who created a piece with Hanna at the Art Partners inaugural

VSA artist and board member Charlotte Holder creates a new piece with Elizabeth Anne Richards at the Virginia Samford Theater.



event last August. The works were then sold at an auction that raised more than \$10,000. VSA Arts has since received grant money to establish Art Partners as a regular program. Aside from filling a need voiced by parents of children with disabilities, and the added benefit of raising funds to provide more programs for artists with disabilities, Van Pelt also draws from her professional experience in recognizing the worth of creative expression. "As a therapist, there is so much value to bringing arts to children...This is life after the clinic, the way that art can open up the world," she says.

Van Pelt also asserts that art opens up the world to more people than children with disabilities and that VSA Arts programs provide opportunities for artists of all ages with a range of talents and challenges. She hopes that their November move to a larger office at the Municipal Arts Center, located at the Virginia Samford Theater, will help her to realize her plans to expand services such as classes for adults and children, as well as offer more opportunities for those interested in the performing and literary arts. Her passion for the future stems from the love of her work as well as the support of an energetic working board of directors.

And, of course, from smiles like Hanna's. ●