

Upcoming Arts Events

Show Features Handicapped Artist's Work

Wheelchair Doesn't Stop Creative Flow

By LILLI LENZ
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If Carol Richardson hears someone describe her as "mildly retarded," a long and vociferous "NO" will emerge from her lips accompanied by a fierce wrinkling of the brow and vigorous shaking of the head.

And if someone mentions the exhibit of her paintings that opens tonight at City Center, along with those of one of her attendant caregivers, Kate Mueller, a grin will spread over her face that makes it perfectly clear just how delighted she is.

Richardson, 29, a quadriplegic born with cerebral palsy, is unable to speak, but that has nothing to do with her intelligence.

"The pediatrician who diagnosed her disease when she was one year old also informed her family that she was mentally retarded," says Mueller, who, as one of a number of aides, takes care of her 20 hours a week in Richardson's Barre St. apartment. "Her family accepted the information because of her inability to talk. They found out later that she was mentally normal. It's just that she's been trapped in an uncooperative body."

In spite of her "uncooperative" body, Richardson, with Mueller's help, has found a way to paint and the results will be on view in the upstairs lobby of City Center through Nov. 29.

Mueller began working with Richardson last January and soon discovered that she had done some painting for a brief period earlier in her life.

"Carol's biggest problem is boredom and the frustration that comes with it," Mueller says, "and any way we can help her express herself is important, so I felt that painting could be a great thing."

Richardson, the oldest of eight children, was cared for by her grandmother until, at the age of 14, she was sent to Brandon Training School. She stayed there for eight years until Washington County Mental Health Agency removed her and placed her in an intermediate care facility in Barre.

"She wasn't really happy in either place," Mueller said, "because her roommates always tended to have more mental and behavioral problems than she did."

Four years ago, Richardson moved to her own apartment which she now shares with Susan, who also has cerebral palsy. "Carol makes caring for her almost easy," says Mueller, "because she's so relaxed about it all. Of course, we both experience times of impatience and frustration when she can't convey to me what she wants or when I can't understand what she's trying to convey."

In addition to the basic care that Mueller provides — the



Photo by Lilli Lenz

Artist Carol Richardson (left) paints while fellow artist and home caretaker Kate Mueller holds pad.

bathing, clothing and feeding — she also supplements Richardson's days with recreational activities to break up the tedium: long talks, going out for ice cream or to the movies and Richardson knows people wherever she goes. When the leaves were turning, Mueller took her in the car on a foliage tour, and for Halloween they went to the Ball at City Center where, by hitching her arm around Mueller's waist, Richardson was able to dance in her wheelchair.

When Mueller asked her if she wanted to paint again, the answer was an emphatic "YES"! So they went out and purchased some materials and set to work.

"The way I first set it up was I tacked a piece of paper on a board, used her TV stand as an easel, and then leaned it up against the TV set," Mueller explains. "Then I would ask her what color she wanted and dip the brush for her. With a great deal of difficulty she would grab it. It's very hard for her, you know, because her fingers won't go the way she wants them to go."

Later, Mueller began to hold the pad and move it for her when she could see Richardson straining to get to a region of the paper that she couldn't reach.

"Invariably now when I come to work, as soon as I get settled in, Carol will ask to paint," Mueller says she indicates this by thrusting her head in the direction of her paintings, raising her eyebrows and grinning."

Like Mueller, Richardson's aides all bring something different to her, depending upon their own likes and dislikes. Mueller loves to walk and loves

to paint, but doesn't care for watching TV, so there are other attendants who give Richardson the companionship she likes when she watches her favorite programs.

But the other aides have begun painting with her, and the interesting thing, according to Mueller, is that Richardson's abstract watercolors are different depending on who is working with her at the time.

"Each staff person loads up the paint on the brush a little differently, or adds more or less water, or holds the pad differently, so I can almost tell who's painted with her by looking at her work," said Mueller.

A couple of months after Richardson started painting, Mueller began to toy with the idea of putting her work on display. "I liked what she was doing so much, her paintings are so exciting to look at, and I knew it would be great for her to see her own work on display. Also, the agency (Washington County Mental Health) has always been big on accessing the community, so I thought, 'well, this would certainly access the community.'"

At about the same time, Mueller heard that City Center was making its still unused space available for exhibition, so she approached Mark Greenberg of the Onion River Arts Council with a thought.

"He liked my idea but suggested that I expand on it and get a few others with disabilities who could also display their work," she says.

From May through September Mueller contacted various people but met with little success. Finally, she thought to herself,

"This is it. I'm just going ahead with it on my own. It's the only way it'll ever get done."

As an oil painter herself, Mueller said she'd been eyeing the City Center space for her own paintings and decided, at last, to put on a show of Richardson's and her work together. With help from the Onion River Arts Council, United Cerebral Palsy of Vermont and several small businesses in the area, Mueller is finally seeing her idea come to life. Some 19 of Richardson's paintings and 15 of Mueller's are now framed and hanging in the lofty space that City Center has vacated.

In describing Richardson's works, Mueller unwittingly uncovers an interesting paradox. "What I like about her paintings is the free movement," said Mueller. "Every trained painter runs the risk of becoming stiff. Because I'm more skilled, my paintings appear more studied and self-conscious, but sometimes I'm able to let myself go and produce something fresh and vibrant like Carol's work." Working with Richardson has also made Mueller more sensitive to color, she said.

The paintings on display will be for sale and Mueller is so impressed with Richardson's designs that she is now considering printing them on fabric and scarves. "It'd be great if she could make some money from her art, because lack of funds is always a problem," Mueller said.

Mueller said Richardson's reaction to the exhibit is one of excitement, but added that she won't get the full impact until Friday's reception, where a large turnout is expected.

The reception is tonight at City Center from 5:30-7:30 p.m.