

# CATA awarded for achievement in arts

By Dave Coffey

**GREATBARRINGTON—**The heart of Community Access to the Arts' mission is at once simple and profound: To honor and celebrate every human being for their abilities and talents. In recognition of this work, CATA was recently announced as one of the winners of the Massachusetts Cultural Council's Commonwealth Awards.

The MCC's Commonwealth Awards honor exceptional achievement in the arts, humanities and sciences, and are given every two years. CATA's award this year was given in the "Access" category, one of three new categories for the award.

"The Commonwealth Award is the highest award in the arts we have here in Massachusetts, so it's a pretty rarified atmosphere," said MCC executive director Anita Walker. "This year we have been really focused on this issue of access and accessibility. CATA absolutely has such a longstanding history and impact, and quite frankly they are an inspiration nationwide for the work that they are doing. It's just so transforming for the individuals."

"It's a great honor," said CATA executive director Sandra Newman. "For me it's about sharing the mission for every human being to be honored for their abilities."

Newman, CATA's founder, started the organization in 1993 with a single workshop. Previously, she had been a dance therapist in Columbia County, N.Y., then in 1987 began consulting in

the Berkshires, where she got the idea to expose her clients to the world of visual and performance art.

"I started taking them out to art museums and cultural places. There were people who were at psychiatric hospitals for 40 years, and they started remembering themselves," said Newman. "Art was always a natural format for me. They can recognize themselves in the way we recognize them."

From their relatively humble beginnings holding one workshop in 1993, CATA has grown considerably, and now recognizes nearly 600 individuals with developmental, physical, emotional and/or mental disabilities each year through 1,000 annual workshops in over 30 settings. For Newman, the Commonwealth Award doesn't just serve as an accolade to CATA's staff, artists and educators—it also serves to broaden the awareness of the community building and individual recognition inherent in CATA's goal to honor the talents and creativity of all people, regardless of ability level.

"The arts really bring out their voices. We've had a woman who couldn't speak, but she found her voice in one of our workshops," said Newman. "Maybe this helps advocate. When you see the work is when you understand. We love people to see the actual process."

With that goal in mind, CATA has in many ways attracted eyes to the work of their artists and participants, not only sharing works of art with the community but providing a means



Photo contributed

CATA program director Dawn Lane with Louisa Milonzi of Moving Company, a group of mixed-ability dancers. They perform at CATA's annual gala every May, and will perform at CATA's 20th anniversary celebration later this year.

of autonomy, recognition and creative pride for artists with disabilities. The Art Cart, a colorful library of framed artwork, songs and stories by CATA artists, is regularly brought to area nursing homes. Their Art on Tour program brings CATA artwork to business, cultural and community sites throughout Berkshire County and beyond. Additionally, CATA art adorns the walls of the State House in Boston. Some CATA art is even auctioned and sold, allowing the artists to earn a monetary commission from their work.

"CATA's participants have become artists in their own right," said Newman.

CATA, along with the other seven Commonwealth

Award recipients, will be honored at a ceremony held at the State House in Boston on February 9. CATA also has other big plans in their 20th year. Their annual performance gala, which will be held May 11 and 12 at Shakespeare & Company's Tina Packer Play House, will celebrate two decades of the organization's outreach. At this gala, they will release a special anthology cataloguing poetry from CATA participants over the last 10 years.

"It's a very positive moment in our 20th year, and to be able to share it with more and more people as we move forward is wonderful," said Newman. "Access for all is a great value, so to pay attention to it is a good thing."