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Sixth annual CATA art show and poetry reading set to begin July 29 in Great Barrington

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The writer Francine Prose probably was not aware of Community Access to the Arts when she wrote "There are many rooms in the house of art," but this encouraging statement serves as an apt designation for the 17-year-old arts program based in Great Barrington.

CATA, as the organization is lovingly referred to, is just what the name implies: an organization, a place, a group that makes the creation of art accessible to people who live with disabilities in the community. On any given day throughout the year, CATA's participants can dive headlong into creating paintings and drawings, writing poetry, dancing, acting or nearly any form of art to their hearts' content. And while there are some guidelines, the artwork is ultimately up to individual expression.

The 24 faculty artists, the volunteers and the staff members are simply there to teach and guide the process along.

"We teach art to individuals, just as we would to anyone else," said Pat Hogan, a painter and framer who has worked as an art teacher with CATA for more than 10 years and who is serving as the artistic director for this year's art show and poetry reading gala. "My job is to help the artists perform at the highest level as they possibly can."

Earlier this year, Shakespeare & Company hosted CATA's performance art gala. The visual art and poetry will be showcased at CATA's "I Am a Part of Art"

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sixth annual art show and poetry reading on Thursday, July 29, at 5 p.m. at CATA's Railroad Street headquarters and gallery in Great Barrington. The exhibit will be on display through Aug. 30.

The art on display and being sold is a culmination of work created during the past year with the theme "Sticks and Stones" in mind. The old childhood rhyme resonates with these artists for many reasons.

Many of the artists who participate in CATA programs are from the area and are familiar with the natural splendor of the Berkshires, and this was an important element to highlight, according to organizers.

"We were directed to work with natural materials, natural colors and our environment," Hogan said. "So we painted a lot of rocks and fossils as a way of sort of getting back to simplicity."

Hogan also serves as CATA's official art framer. As a testament to the support from the community, the Frames on Wheels frame shop has played a huge part in putting together this show. In the past few weeks she has spent more hours matting and framing the artwork for this year's gala than she cares to count.

The aphorism's more metaphoric meaning, based on the second part of the line "Sticks and stones may break my bones, but words can never hurt me," was certainly not lost on the artists, either.

"One of the projects we did dealt with words as a centerpiece," Hogan explained. "We talked about words that feel good, words that feel bad and created work based on that."

Hogan was proud of one collaborative piece in particular.

"We wrote down the words on paper and tore them apart and collaged them on a large board," she said. The board was then painted and textured with natural objects such as tree bark, sticks and other elements. Even the faculty and staff contributed to the piece, which will remain in one of the workshops as a reminder of this year's theme.

CATA's poets got in on the theme, too, which is especially poignant given the circumstances some of the artists find themselves in.

"A lot of our artists often talk about what it's like to feel isolated," Hogan said. "All the work we do here is to try to help eliminate those feelings."

"A Life of Learning," a poem by CATA participant Amy Sequenzia that will be read during the gala on Thursday, starts with these lines: "Being me is hard sometimes / But it's no different than being you / We dream and hope just the same / We learn from hardships too".

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This year CATA welcomes Donald Platt to read the poetry. Platt is a well-known professional poet and brother of an artist that works with CATA.

"Donald Platt had contacted us to ask if he could help out in any way, and we thought he would be perfect for the poetry reading," said Dawn Lane, CATA's art director and dance instructor.

Lane has been working with CATA since 1995. And since then she has seen the gala grow from a two-day event at Shakespeare & Company to two separate events over several weeks.

"We grew to the point that we couldn't fit everything," she said. "So, in an effort to honor the visual arts, we wanted to distinguish it and have a separate event in a real art gallery.

"Here we are now in our sixth year," she added.

The size and impact of CATA has grown right along with their annual performances and art shows. What began as a dance program for women with disabilities living in Stockbridge has ballooned to include more than 500 artists participating in 24 different programs that range from residential workshops to full classes teaching all aspects of performing on stage.

"Now, we have performing arts classes that have grown so big that our faculty have been able to extract certain groups of people who have a passion or talent for that particular art form, and now we have classes that are solely for preparing work for the show," Lane said.

The artwork on display at the CATA gallery certainly speaks to the artists' talent, as well. And that, perhaps, is something that gets overlooked. CATA faculty and staff are committed to their work and to the fact that the people they serve are not "disabled people," they are artists who just happen to have a disability. By referring to participants in this way, it reduces the stigma and identifies them as individuals, who are just like the rest of us, and who have the same desires to express themselves. CATA helps them enable themselves to do so, by simply providing access to art.

"I measure success when I see that the artwork reflects the individual artist," Hogan said. "I don't want it to all look the same. They should express what they wish to express."

"Here we are in this art mecca," Lane said. "This is such a cultural haven, and we believe that that culture should be accessible to everybody.

"That's pretty much our purpose."

Community Access to the Arts' sixth annual "I Am a Part of Art" art show and poetry reading starts at 5 p.m. Thursday, July 29, at CATA's gallery at 70 Railroad St. in Great Barrington. Artworks will be on display and on sale through Aug. 30. For more information visit communityaccesstothearts.org or call 413-528-5485.

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