



Building a Bridge to Arts Access

2013 heralds the Lehigh Valley as the fourth region in the state to formally inaugurate a Pennsylvania Arts Access Program. In doing so, the Lehigh Valley joins other statewide partners in helping the cultural community become more accessible to and inclusive of people with disabilities.

Basically, the program provides people who have sensory disabilities (blindness/low-vision or deafness/hard-of-hearing) greater accessibility to cultural events by meeting the following goals:

1. Helping arts organizations increase accessibility
2. Building audiences and awareness

In return, cultural organizations gain access to an untapped segment of the market while positively confronting their fear about complying with the Americans for Disability Act.

It took two years and the commitment of many to build community-wide arts access collaboration in the Lehigh Valley. Under the leadership of VSA Pennsylvania (the state organization on arts and disabilities) and Philadelphia's Amaryllis Theatre Company, the Tri-County Accessible Arts Coalition was created in 2011 to nurture relationships among the region's disability and cultural communities. The coalition includes the two largest disability service organizations in the region, the Center for Vision Loss and the Lehigh Valley Center for Independent Living; a number of individuals with disabilities; and a few cultural organizations, Muhlenberg College Theatre & Dance, Shawnee Playhouse, and the Lehigh Valley Arts Council. The groundwork has been laid, and the practical steps of securing the necessary equipment, providing the training, and building audiences are underway.

Background of the Program

In 2003, under the leadership of Mimi Kenney Smith, Amaryllis founded the Greater Philadelphia arts access initiative, Independence Starts Here! Amaryllis was then asked to serve as the Pennsylvania affiliate for VSA, the

Lehigh Valley and Monroe County Statistics

- 580,626 people with disabilities.
- 13,013 people with sensory disabilities.
- 9,751 children with disabilities (6,431 sensory, language, or learning disabilities).

The Buying Power of People with Disabilities

- People with disabilities have more than \$175 billion in discretionary income.
- More than 75% of people with disabilities eat in restaurants twice a week.
- 4 million Americans turn 50 each year; people over 50 spent \$400 billion in 2003. More than 45% of people over 65 have a disability; seniors with disabilities control more than 40% of net assets in America.
- 92% of Americans more favorably view companies that hire people with disabilities than they view companies that do not.

international organization for arts and disabilities (now part of the John F. Kennedy Center for the Performing Arts), and ever since has been working with the Pennsylvania Council on the Arts and other statewide and local partners to increase accessibility to cultural events. Three regions in the state, Philadelphia, Pittsburgh, and York/Lancaster, currently have programs established, and these programs are serving as models for the Lehigh Valley. On October 5, 2012, the 2012 National Accessibility Leadership Award for exceptional initiatives or programs that make the arts accessible and inclusive for older adults and individuals with disabilities was presented to the Pennsylvania Council on the Arts at its annual conference in Washington, D.C.

continued on next page

ARTS COUNCIL MATTERS

Building a Bridge *(continued)*

In the Lehigh Valley

In late 2010, Mary Ann Alexander, a blind woman working at the Center for Vision Loss in Allentown, spearheaded a new theatre access committee with VSA PA/ Amaryllis. She invited members of the disability and cultural communities to join the committee, and in 2011, they established the Tri-County Accessible Arts Coalition with its own logo. The group meets monthly and has produced five accessible performances (four at Muhlenberg College Theatre and one at Shawnee Theatre) using equipment and training from VSA PA/ Amaryllis. The coalition is currently led by Rita Lang of the Center for Vision Loss.

The Lehigh Valley Arts Council joined the coalition in 2011 to promote the program in the larger cultural community. The Arts Council also began to secure funding from local businesses and foundations to purchase audio-description and open-captioning equipment that will be

shared among local arts groups. Audio description is a form of audio-visual translation using natural pauses to insert narrative that translates the visual image into an audible form. Patrons use headsets to hear the audio description. Open captioning provides the audience with an electronic text display to the side of the stage, displaying lyrics, dialogue, and sound effects in real time. The Arts Council is responsible for housing, maintaining, and scheduling the equipment. It will work with the coalition to coordinate the mechanisms for marketing the accessible performances, such as managing monthly e-mail campaigns to a list of patrons developed through disability providers.

VSA PA/ Amaryllis will provide training in audio description and open captioning to staff, board, or volunteer members of cultural organizations, and offer customer service training (which includes appropriate language, disability awareness, and tips for welcoming patrons with disabilities) to development, front-of-house, and other personnel of arts organizations.

Expanded Benefit Pool

While the program was created for primarily adult audience members at performing arts events, a growing number of beneficiaries have emerged beyond that initial market segment. For instance, the equipment is now regularly used at numerous children's theatre productions in Philadelphia. Audio-description equipment has also been used to provide foreign language translation for a documentary film from Cambodia, and captioning is used on an ongoing basis to provide Spanish language translation at Fulton Opera in Lancaster and at selected productions in Greater Philadelphia. Most current research suggests that not only students with sensory disabilities can benefit from audio description and captioning, but also students with speech or language disabilities, as well as those with learning and cognitive disabilities.

The aging population of baby-boomers has also created a greater need to provide more accessible performances. According to the U.S. Census, more than 45% of people over 65 years of age have a disability. Seniors with disabilities control more than 40% of net assets in America.

Engaging the Local Community

Nonprofit arts organizations are invited to join the coalition and gain access to the use of this equipment.

Thank you to the following organizations for their support toward the purchase of securing equipment: Butz Family Foundation; Just Born, Inc.; Keystone Nazareth Charitable Foundation; Rider Pool Foundation; and William C. Rybak Handicapped Citizens Fund of the Lehigh Valley Community Foundation.

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Our Mission: To promote the arts; to encourage and support artists and their development; to assist arts organizations; and to facilitate communication and cooperation among artists, arts organizations, and the community.

The Lehigh Valley Arts Council is a Pennsylvania Partner in the Arts, a program of the PCA.



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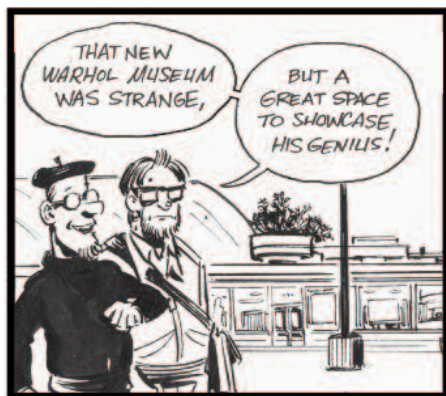
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THE INSIDE TRACK

Photographer **Michael Reese Much** has an image in the 2013 calendar of the Royal

Microscopical Society of Oxford, UK. The image is a photo-micrograph of the cell structure of a dog's stomach.

The **Pennsylvania Shakespeare Festival** in Center Valley is hosting the 22nd annual conference of the Shakespeare Theatre Association from January 7 through January 12. Shakespeare artists, leaders, and educators from 49 theatre companies (whose primary mission is to produce the works of William Shakespeare), 26 states, and 8 countries will come together to examine many topics, including how Shakespeare connects different cultures, faiths, and languages.

Jewelry artist **Ann Lalik** is showing her work in the Art and Science exhibit at the Freyberger Gallery on the Penn State Berks campus in Reading from January 10 through February 22.

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ONE LAST THOUGHT

Looking Ahead

2013 is shaping up as the "Year of Greater Access" as your Lehigh Valley Arts Council offers services designed to engage larger audiences:

Pennsylvania Arts Access Program offers visually impaired and hearing-impaired people access to cultural events by providing arts groups with shared use of audio-description and open-captioning equipment.

Cultural List Exchange Co-Op utilizes marketing segmentation practices to expand audiences for the Lehigh Valley.

Pennsylvania Partners in the Arts Grants Program supports individual artists and community groups in bringing arts activities to underserved audiences.

Arts Alive is an arts-enrichment series for individuals who are eager to step behind the scenes of the arts experience and rub shoulders with the creative process.

Visit our website at LVArtsCouncil.org to learn more about these programs and the upcoming year's schedule. We all need art to partake in a better life. Happy New Year!

Randall Forte