

Deaf-Blind Perspectives

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The Helen Keller International Art Show An Annual Event

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DB-LINK

Art shows are full of surprises. Beauty is captured in a combination of colors, images, textures, and objects. The 2001 Helen Keller International Art Show offered many such marvels. Bulging yellow eyes and black handles extending from a sculpted head. A large textured blue tree that dominates the serenity of a collage of grandpa's farm. Kangaroos standing under a large sun in a black and white drawing of the Australian outback. A photograph that captures the distortion of images layered in a mirrored reflection. One of the show's more surprising elements, however, was not obvious. The artists were children who are visually impaired, blind, or deaf-blind.

The Helen Keller International Art Show is a yearly event sponsored by the Council for Exceptional Children's Division on Visual Impairments (DVI). Under the guidance of Dr. Mary Jean Sanspree, a professor at the University of Alabama Vision Science Research Center and director of the Alabama Deafblind Project, the show has moved from an annual event in Alabama to an international celebration of children's art that travels to galleries and conferences throughout the country.

The show began in 1984 as a project of the Alabama state chapter of DVI. In 1996, Dr. Roseanna Davidson, a professor at Texas Tech University College of Education, became president of the national chapter of DVI. She had seen the show a number of times in Alabama and suggested that the division develop the show as a national project. Since 1996, the invitation to participate has been open to children from all corners of the world who are under 22 years of age and are visually impaired, blind, or deaf-blind. More than 150 pieces of artwork were submitted for the 2001 show. Thirty pieces are selected each year.

The show includes all types of visual art, such as sculpture, collage, and photography. Throughout the year, art fans (families, teachers, professionals, and even members of Congress) have the opportunity to place bids for individual pieces of art that they would like to purchase. During the seven years that the show has traveled, nearly every piece has sold. Dollars generated from those sales go into the budget for the following year's exhibition.

Families and professionals know about the marvelous accomplishments of children who are blind or deaf-blind. The art show gives the rest of the world an opportunity to experience their talents and expressive abilities. Students are able to demonstrate their formidable talents so that others can share in their unique perceptions of the world.

Many people assume that children who have vision loss can only use art forms that are tactual, such as sculpture. In reality, these children can use a variety of media to express their perceptions and experiences through art. One child takes apart toy trucks to feel the shapes of wheels and fenders and reproduces these shapes in a collage. Another student, who is in a wheelchair with head supports, manages to position himself to create detailed artistic strokes that result in a magnificent tiger portrait. "I have seen a child be one inch from the paper and draw the most perfect Ninja turtle," says Roseanna Davidson.

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“You just don’t know what they can do until they do it.”

Jeff Pruett, a 17-year-old student from Texas, is one of the 30 artists whose work was chosen for the 2001 show. His luminescent portrait of a tiger is entitled *Eyes in the Night*. “Over the years,” says Dr. Davidson, “it is hard to imagine all of the things the show has done for families and students. It gives them a chance to participate in a different realm, to participate in art.” Dr. Sanspree agrees. “I have known entire families who have flown across the country to see their child’s art displayed in the National Cathedral,” she says. “This is a group of kids who often don’t get recognized or get the rewards.” But with participation in the show, they are often featured in their local news and get recognition from their state senators.

The philosophy of the show is that each child is a winner. Each artist who submits a work of art for the show receives a certificate of participation. Those whose work is selected to tour receive artist certificates and a show catalog. To ensure that most of the students get recognized on a local level, U.S. Senators are notified that children in their states have been selected for the show and local newspapers receive press releases.

Dr. Sanspree is the first to express surprise at the show’s success and the extent to which it has taken on a life of its own. General enthusiasm for the show



Craig Axelrod, Texas School for the Blind and Visually Impaired (L) and Jeff Pruett (R)

and a willingness to improvise landed the organizers a grand opening for the first national show at the National Cathedral in Washington, DC. Coincidentally, the ashes of both Helen Keller and Anne Sullivan were placed in the National Cathedral. With very short notice, the group built packing crates, organized shipping, and set up the show. Keller Johnson, an Alabama resident and niece of Helen Keller, went along as a volunteer. Another volunteer printed postcards of the artwork to sell to raise money for shipping costs. Suddenly, an event was born. Six years later, the cost of framing and shipping the show is between \$5,000 and \$10,000 an-

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- Network with families. State deaf-blind project family specialists can provide information and support or serve as mentors to families.

Summary

There is strong support for a connection between early intervention and learning experiences and later school and work performance (Sandall, McLean, and Smith, 2000). Identifying children who are deaf-blind and starting services as early in life as possible are crucial in order to give each child the best possible opportunity to learn and develop. State deaf-blind projects and others involved in the lives of children who are deaf-blind can play an important role by assisting state early intervention systems to meet the unique needs of infants and toddlers who are deaf-blind.

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Technical Assistance to Early Childhood Providers in Kentucky

The following are examples of technical assistance activities used by Kentucky Services for Children and Young Adults Who Are Deafblind:

- Various local, state, and regional training opportunities (topics determined based on evaluation of participants' needs).
- Printed information (topical papers, brochures, newsletter) to update families and service providers about resources, upcoming events, and best practices.
- Regular, ongoing contact with families by telephone to find out how they are doing and determine whether they have a particular need that might be addressed by the project.
- Reach for the Stars, a specific training initiative designed to help families and service providers use a person-centered approach to plan a young child's transition from early intervention to preschool and from preschool to primary school.
- Close collaboration with the state's lead agency and other major service providers in the state to improve early identification of children who are deaf-blind (this has resulted in a significant rise in the number of referrals of children, from birth to age two, who have been referred to the project).
- Training of service providers to teach receptive and expressive communication skills to persons who have severe and/or multiple disabilities including deaf-blindness (the project received Comprehensive System of Personnel Development (CSPD) funds to develop and provide this training).
- Development and coordination of a university course, Severe Handicaps Integrated Preschool Programming, funded by a grant to the project from CSPD and Part B 619 funds (individuals serving children on the state deaf-blind project census are given first priority to attend the course).
- Development and teaching of other university and distance-learning courses as part of Kentucky's State Improvement Grant activities on the topic of natural environments.
- The use of project staff as trainers on four statewide early childhood training teams, giving them an opportunity to share valuable information about deaf-blindness and to conduct child find activities.

