

Passion with a purpose

By LORI MURRAY

Harry Grimm of Athens sits in his wheelchair and stares with pride at his completed water-color painting, displayed on a table before him in the Passion Works art studio. Painted just two days after Christopher Reeve's death, the picture has dramatic impact. It's a picture of Reeve, in his wheelchair, with his family, with Superman flying overhead.

The painting takes on new meaning after learning that Grimm is an adult with developmental disabilities, and Reeve had been one of Grimm's personal champions in life. And that's just one of the exceptionally heart-warming stories to come out of Passion Works Studio, a unique collaboration of artists with and without developmental disabilities and mental retardation. There are many more.

Before art director Patty Mitchell brought passion to the Athens County vocational workshop in 1996, most of the special-needs adults spent their days assembling pens. Since she arrived on the scene, many of the adults have been introduced to art, using their original designs to create products that are being sold in more than 90 venues across the country, as well as through the studio's website and catalog.

Last year sales amounted to \$122,000 on a product line that includes everything from jewelry, ceramics and paintings to quilts, sculptures and greeting cards, as well as the dramatically colorful Passion Works flower. The flower is made from recycled metal newspaper plates, and it is based on the original design of artist Carolyn Williams. More than 12,000 flowers have been sold to date.

To accomplish the work, visiting artists from the

Ohio Arts Council work closely with artists-in-residence and special-needs adults to create original artwork and designs. For example, a local jewelry designer made charms from the artists' designs to create products that generated \$60,000 in sales during the first two years. The artists' designs become the basis for a host of products that are sold for a profit.

Production artists and volunteers from the community and nearby Ohio University help to make the program succeed. Says Mitchell: "We don't want to be dependent on grants or government money that can be cut. We want to create as much meaningful employment as we can." Although Mitchell's salary is paid by the Athens County Board of Mental Retardation and Developmental Disabilities, everything else is paid for by grants and product sales.



Colorful works of art are all in a day's work at Passion Works Studio in Athens. (Photos courtesy of Passion Works)



A visit to the studio unveils a group of special-needs adults seated around a large art table, exchanging lively conversation while taking pride in each artistic achievement. One woman draws colorful lines on the metal that eventually will be flower petals, while another woman learns to draw animals for the first time.

Artist-in-residence Wendy Minor enthusiastically guides and supports, but never overpowers, the artists. Minor is one of the main reasons

Passion Works is so fantastic, and the artists clearly adore her. Daily she works to boost their confidence, and the results are nothing short of inspirational. Take Grimm, for example. In the beginning, he painted only in solid colors. Then one day he did a multicolored drawing of a girl jumping rope next to a school bus. What prompted the change? "I was happy," he replies.

Unlike many artists, Mitchell is a creative marketer as well. She has recruited the expertise of the

Ohio University School of Business to develop marketing plans for the different products, and she always is on the lookout for marketing techniques that will create additional forms of employment.

Case in point is the idea for Passion Works parties. Similar in concept to a Tupperware party in which individuals market the products in their home, the parties are yet another way to expose the work of these talented artists.

As might be expected, many of the sales take place through a catalog and Web page, www.passionworks.org. The good news is that while this has been only a wholesale outlet in the past, plans currently are underway to extend to the retail market as well. Many of the products also are used as fundraising vehicles for other organizations, either donated or sold at a discount. Passion Works greeting cards will be the official international fundraising tool for Civitan, which plans to do most of the marketing.

Obviously, Mitchell is committed to making people independent, and that extends beyond the adults with developmental disabilities. Passion Works also creates employment for local, visiting artists as they collaborate with the special-needs individuals. "Visiting artists coming in know our mediums so well. They have a totally new perspective, and therefore you get a new perspective," says Mitchell. "We celebrate our visiting artist opportunities made possible through the Ohio Arts Council."

Passion Works' creativity knows no bounds. As the artists work, a CD player plays folk-like music. This CD is their latest success story, a recent collaboration with Hocking College poetry students and local musicians. After Passion Works studio artists and the college students had been writing poetry together for almost four years, the poems were shared with local musicians who put the words to music. The result is "Get Up and Fly," a CD that includes 12 songs, radio interviews, video, artwork, photographs and portraits of the artists. Among the incredible lineup of songs is Grimm's own love song written for his girlfriend.

The CD is testimony to the kind of place that Passion Works has become — a place where developmental disabilities simply don't matter. It's about the creative spirit and passion of people with a

future. Knowing that, it's no surprise that Mitchell has received phone calls from people in Japan, South Africa and Chile who want to emulate the Passion Works model. She admits she can't sleep at night, just thinking about the endless possibilities for growth.

"The difference with our program is the component of arts to product to work," Mitchell says. "In the end, you get meaningful work. A machine can't do this, but a machine can put a cap on a pen." □

Lori Murray is a freelance writer from Columbus.

For more information about Passion Works Studio, call 740-592-6659 or go to www.passionworks.org.



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Sunapple shares the passion

Franklin County has its own artistic success story. Sunapple & Company, a division of ARC Industries, Inc., began in 1994 with four product lines of hand-crafted items. Like Passion Works, the products are made with developmental disabilities, and they are based on the original artistic designs of these individuals.

Early last year, Sunapple & Company approached the Columbus Zoo about an exciting new product that uses acrylic resin material to make SunZoo pins. Four artists created the original drawings that are the inspiration behind the production process, each one depicting a popular zoo material. After reducing the drawings to pin size, they are hand cut out of the colorful acrylic resin, and then a metal die of the animal shape is put together so the artists can reproduce multiple copies. The result is a one-of-a-kind animal pin — from snakes and penguins to lions and elephants. The pins are secured to the clothing with a magnet.

Similar to the pins, Sunapple employees also make holiday ornaments and pins. Along with that, a recent collaboration with Franklin County Children's Services (FCCC) enabled them to create Sun People pins, bright and happy renditions of a child. The pins were used to help support the FCCC levy campaign. At the same time, they made it possible for special-needs individuals to experience the joy and pride associated with meaningful employment.

For more information about purchasing the pins and ornaments, call 800-734-7007 or go to www.sunapple.net.