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Disabilities don't stop young artists

BY JENNIFER DEWITT
 MADISONCHATHAM THIS WEEK
 • June 3, 2009

MADISON -- When 25-year-old Katherine DeCotiis, was tasked with creating a hypothetical proposal letter for a creative writing class at Fairleigh Dickinson University, she had no idea at the time that it would lead to a 31/2-year volunteering opportunity.

"The nonprofit I chose was Arts Unbound," she said. "I decided to send the letter, and they invited me to come and see them. I just loved it. I immediately felt at home there. They are so kind, and I'm happy to do anything they need me to do."

Arts Unbound is a nonprofit organization located in Orange that was created to provide artistic and vocational opportunities in visual arts for individuals living with physical, mental or developmental disabilities.

DeCotiis, who has been filling in for a special education teacher on maternity leave at the Madison Junior School, is also a photographer, so helping others in visual arts is a natural fit for her.

"They wanted to sell framed prints of some of the artwork. So I took photos of the pieces and prepared the images for the Web site," she said.

She also aids them in setting up the gallery space, manning the front desk and handling the sales of the art pieces. She even has taught a few classes.

"They have affiliations with other organizations, and I went to a picnic for kids with disabilities," the Madison resident said. "We made tote bags and picture frames. I'm a teacher, and special ed is my thing, so my favorite part of the day was meeting all the young artists."

DeCotiis has been helping kids since she was in high school. She attended Oak Knoll in Summit and said the school is very community service oriented.

"I volunteered at Camp Hope in East Hanover, and that's really where the seed was planted," she said. "I like to give back."

Volunteer Award

She was recognized for her efforts when she was a senior and was given the Morris County Youth Volunteer Award.

DeCotiis, who puts in roughly 15 hours a month at Arts Unbound, said volunteering brings her happiness and helps put things in perspective.

"There was a youth exhibit, and I was amazed at the beautiful piece that a 14-year-old boy had created who is blind, deaf and cannot speak. He is so intelligent and is living his life with what others might see as a huge disability. It really gives you inner strength and makes you understand your place in the universe.

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JENNIFER DEWITT /
 MADISONCHATHAM THIS WEEK
 Katherine DeCotiis of Madison volunteers for Arts Unbound, a nonprofit organization that provides artistic and vocational opportunities in visual arts for individuals with disabilities.

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DeCotiis will be searching for a full-time teaching position for the fall, but in the meantime she is looking forward to the next artist exhibition at Arts Unbound, which begins June 6.

"I want to see what I can pack in the stream of life. I want to live my life giving back. Gratitude is an action, not just a saying," she said. "Everyone has talents. Why keep them to yourself? Use it for the benefit of others."

For more information on Arts Unbound, visit www.artsunbound.org.

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