

like talent. They are the Outsiders.

It may have been 10 years ago that a social worker thrust a sheaf of papers into Megan Marlatt's hands as she came out of church one Sunday. She looked through the five-inch-high stack and recalls her reaction. "The guy was extremely intense," she remembers. "This guy has to do this. There's an URGENCY. Very creative and wonderful."

She also noticed that Joe Simms was using anything and everything he could get his hands on to make his art....pizza boxes, ruled school paper with ring binder holes, model airplane paint, his mother's lipstick even.

The social worker handed those papers to the right person. Megan holds the Art Studio chair at the University of Virginia and is an accomplished artist herself. She also has personal experience with treating mental illness and mental disability; it runs in her family. She felt she could help this man. She set it up for Joe to come to her studio on a Saturday. When that Saturday arrived, there stood Laura Burrell at Joe's side.

The two outsiders were invited in. For two years Megan and Linda Marston-Reid made their studios available to Laura and Joe on Saturdays. Because Megan teaches at UVA, she had access to leftover and abandoned art supplies that she gave to Laura and Joe. They called it the Orange Studio program, and they transferred it to The Arts Center once it became established.

Both Laura and Joe are, in today's parlance, "mentally challenged," but they are vastly different. Joe is disabled. When Megan first met him, he could hardly talk, and when he did, he stuttered. Since the Orange Studio program, his confidence level has zoomed, "and he stopped stuttering."

Laura graduated from Marymount College with a degree in art and was apparently doing fine in this world of the "normal" when something snapped...we're not quite sure. When Megan and Linda first discovered her at the President Madison

Inn, "she's stuffing her drawings under her bed. Here's an artist who doesn't have a studio," she protests. She pauses a beat. "So, now she has a studio."

In the beginning, representatives of the mental health community approached Megan and Linda about expanding Orange Studio, maybe even transforming it into an art therapy program. But Megan is quick to point out, "The idea was to nurture artists who happened to have a mental disability," and not to make art available to all people with mental health and disability issues.

The Orange Studio has been wildly successful. Laura and Joe are being exhibited in Richmond, Washington, and now, New York. Joe's work adorns an entire wall at an Outsider art exhibit at the HAI Gallery in Soho.

When Megan renovated her studio and converted it into an apartment, she donated all the windows in the historic building to The Arts Center. Joe paints on the 33-inch-square panes. One pane fetches \$225. A framed 9" X 12" Laura Burrell will bring \$150. The Arts Center splits the proceeds of their art sales with the two artists. That income keeps Laura and Joe in materials and supplies, and the building in heat, A/C, light and water.

There's a slight problem in that too much success may actually hurt these artists. "Joe has really kind of taken off," says Megan. If he makes too much money, he'll lose his benefits, she explains. And being a realist, she knows that an artist can count on one or two hot years and that's all. What happens when the market for Joe's stuff grows cold?

"The outsider artists are prolific. It's a way to communicate," says Laura Thompson. She points to a window pane depicting an angulated black man with a pointy hat. It looks a little bit like one of Picasso's circus figures. Joe has written on the side, "Night Man." Laura asks incredulously. "Where did that come from?"

We may never know where it came from...the important thing is that it came out.



Surrounded by examples of his work, Joe Simms paints every Saturday at The Arts Center in Orange. He averages five or more paintings per day. Below, Laura Burrell has a degree in art from Marymount College in Northern Virginia. A participant in the Orange Studio program, she can be found most Saturdays painting at The Arts Center in Orange.

Photos by Phil Audibert



THE ARTS CENTER IN ORANGE



"Something really special"

At the recent Equus II opening at The Arts Center in Orange, patrons mingled about admiring a stunning array of images of horses. They nibbled hors d'oeuvres. They sipped wine. They huddled in small groups and talked quietly beneath the blazing gallery lights. For a moment there, these folks were not in Orange any more; they had been transported to some hip art gallery in a big city.

Little did they know that had it been raining, just a few feet above their heads, on the second floor, a group of buckets on a tarp formed



Above, Arts Center Executive Director Laura Thompson contemplates diverse depictions of horses in the recent Equus II exhibit at The Arts Center in Orange. At top, a series of paintings by Joe Simms on large window panes adorns one wall of the classroom at The Arts Center in Orange. Currently, The Arts Center is offering classes in photography, oil, acrylic and watercolor painting, basic drawing, and ceramics.

Photos by Phil Audibert

the next to last line of defense between them and a leak in the roof.

They also would not have known that after the reception was over, Arts Center President, Ed Harvey would have climbed the rickety stairs and emptied those buckets himself.

It is what Executive Director, Laura Thompson calls the "\$17,000 roof leak." And then there's the \$50,000 heat pump to make this cavernous second floor space bearable during the extremes of winter and summer...not to mention a multi-thousand-dollar new ceramics studio in the back.

Laura tries not to distract piano teacher, Julie Jackson and her student, as she conducts a tour of the back room of The Arts Center in Orange. "I would love, just love to let Julie have this space," says Laura pointing to a small room, perfectly proportioned for a music studio. "She's so patient," she whispers.

We climb the stairs, past the rotted floorboards on the landing, dodging bird droppings and come out in a classic brick-walled timber-trussed loft. "Isn't it a cool space?" asks Laura giddily as she points to some skylights that will eventually provide natural light to the art classrooms below.

The possibilities are endless. Artists could have studios here. Germanna Community College could have a satellite art school here. Businesses could rent this upstairs space and provide The Arts Center with rental income. Poor Julie could teach piano in a sound-proof space without interruption.

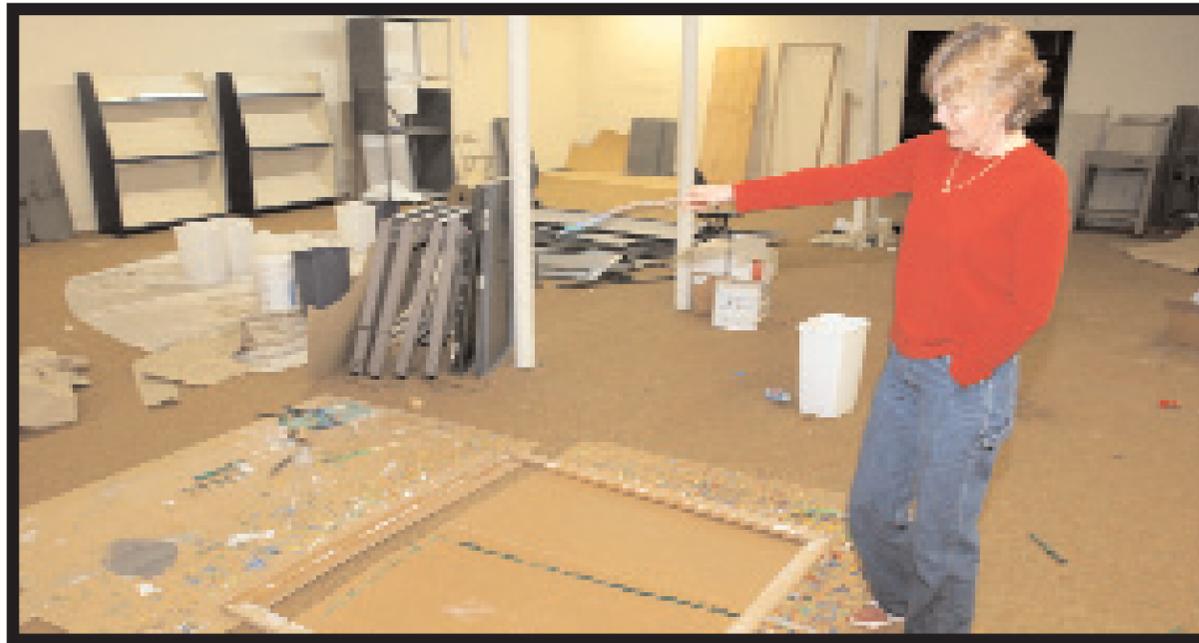
It will happen; it's just a matter of when. The first step is virtually assured... turning ownership of Bob Morin's former Orange Furniture Store over to The Arts Center. "Whatever the lawyers and tax accountants work out," explains Laura adding, that once The Arts Center has title to the building, "then I could go after grant money to finish it."

The Arts Center in Orange is at a crossroads, and it needs your help to make it to the other side. With the help of private donations and the town and county of Orange, it has come a long way. But it has a long way to go, too.

One place it is not going is away, because for a town this size, the Arts Center in Orange is unrivaled. "Whenever we start to get kind of blue we'll see it through the new eyes of some visitor to Orange, who'll be so jealous," smiles Laura, proudly. "They wish they had something like this in their hometown. People will say they're considering moving to Orange and they are so excited about Orange because they think any place that has something like this must be a great place to live."

In a little less than 10 years, The Arts Center has grown from Linda Marston-Reid's living room to a multi-faceted Main Street facility that rotates cutting-edge art exhibits monthly; offers classes and workshops in everything from drawing to ceramics...photography to oil painting; provides studio space and materials to two talented artists with mental disabilities, reaches out to the community with programs in the schools, care centers and nursing homes, runs a Virginia Artists Gift Shop and a summer art camp for kids. Did we forget anything here?

"It's too much," protests Laura, pointing to her assistant, Tanya Reeves. "Both Tanya and I are saying



Laura Thompson demonstrates how kids in the summer camp program created a Jackson Pollock-like abstract painting that sold for \$175. Note the buckets and tarp in the background. The Arts Center desperately needs a new roof. Once The Arts Center gains title to the building, supporters hope to renovate the upstairs of the 10,000 square foot building to house artist studios, small business offices, even a satellite art school for Germanna Community College.

Photos by Phil Audibert

"Whoa. Don't put one more thing on our plate," Even though Equus II has a few more weeks to run, they are hard at work gearing up for an exhibit of longtime Orange County High School art teacher, Lee Nixon and his students.

It all started about 10 short years ago. "One of the first things I noticed was the lack of art," writes Arts Center co-founder, Linda Marston-Reid in a recent e-mail. It didn't take long for her and another artist in town, Megan Marlatt, to join forces. Together they

approached the Orange Downtown Alliance. "The town council was looking into what made some small towns have successful downtown areas, and they had observed that many had arts or cultural centers," writes Reid.

The first fundraiser was held in Reid's living room. Larry Buchanan and Enrique Kiguel leant them space in a building they own on May-Fray Avenue. They organized classes, searched for volunteer teachers, sought funding and eventually hired Aimee Hunt to

be the director. And ironically, once they hired a Director, Linda Marston Reid moved to New York, to be a full-time artist.

Linda writes, "The day-to-day challenges of the next five years would take a book," adding "the volunteers are the special angels because without them The Arts Center would never have come this far. They followed us through four moves and some rather harsh conditions (freezing in the winter and killer hot in the summer). I will never forget the volunteers."

Like architect Louisa Bradford, who after the old Orange Furniture building was used for a fundraiser, approached owner, Bob Morin with a vision. They made it happen...a permanent home for The Arts Center on Main Street...the fourth and final move. Louisa leant interest-free money to buy the materials, and persuaded local carpenters to donate the work. "You can see as you walk through, the ceilings aren't done and the spackling as you get towards the back starts to peter out," notes Laura Thompson. "That's where the volunteers kind of wore out. But they got a lot done. I was amazed. A lot of people pitched in and worked hard, and what they did is what we have today."

What they have today is a diverse multi-directional organization that sometimes finds Laura Thompson caught in the middle. "You can't make everybody happy," she realizes. Take the hand-painted tiles that adorn the front of the building, for example. They were painted by elementary school students. "Some people hate the tiles. Some people love the tiles," she shrugs. "Every time I figure out which way the wind blows on that, somebody comes in and says 'don't you dare take those tiles down.'"

Then there was the Jackson Pollock look-alike painting the summer art camp kids created. "They danced around the canvas and dribbled the paint all over. They sold it for \$175... a \$9 dropcloth and some left-over paint. That was fun."

Laura is quick to point out that although she grew up in a family of artists, "they were so much better than me that I deliberately avoided art. But then I ended up doing it anyway." She found she had a knack for graphic design, "but I'm not an artist."

Some time ago, Laura took over a struggling art gallery in the Adirondacks and turned it around. Now she sees herself doing the same here. "It gets tough sometimes but I'm too stubborn to quit. Besides, I want it to work." She too credits the volunteers, too numerous to mention. "I know we can make this into something really special," she says with a note of finality.

The Outsiders



Mouse- by Laura Burrell.

Joe Simms paints all day every day. Listening to soul music on headphones, he often completes five works in an eight-hour stretch...sometimes more. As soon as he's finished a picture, he puts it down and starts another.

At The Arts Center, in preparation for art classes they used to put out sheets of blank newsprint for the students. The sheets kept disappearing. Joe had taken them and turned them into paintings.

Laura Burrell is a familiar sight on the streets of Orange. Lovingly adopted as Orange's own odd artist, she

shuffles along, dressed in her trademark red coat, clutching a huge mug of coffee, smoking cigarettes. Sometimes she mutters to the unseen. Usually she's on her way from her room at the President Madison Inn to The Arts Center.

She paints mostly animals, raccoons and mice with beady eyes, birds with curlicues. Her work reminds you of Chagall.

Picasso once said that all children are natural artists; they just forget when they become adults. Here are two adults who never lost that child-



Joe Simms has participated in the Orange Studio program at The Arts Center in Orange for about ten years now. He is currently being exhibited in "Outsider" art shows in New York and Washington, D.C.

Photo by Phil Audibert