

1. Type of Volunteerism: Please describe the nominee's work as a volunteer. Discuss the capacity in which the nominee has served including details such as the length and duration of service, where they volunteer, who they interact with and what he/she specifically does when they are volunteering.

In the year 2000, Saranne Brown (we call her Sara), co-founded Play Among the Stars Theatre Group aka (PATS) in Salem New Hampshire with her friend and active board member Charlene Westerdale.

Play Among the Stars Theatre Group is comprised of approximately 60 clients, each with a physical, mental, or emotional disability, 15 part time volunteers, and numerous ancillary volunteers comprised primarily of client family members. The group produces two shows per year at the Salem NH high school auditorium, one show during the holiday season and one in the spring. To date the group has put on 28 distinct shows over 14 years. Typically each production showcases 30+ different acts, and requires 12-14 weeks of rehearsal (once per week), a dress rehearsal, and the show.

Sara is the primary organizer/writer/director/choreographer/stenographer/secretary/seamstress and much more. Each show or event begins and ends with Sara from conceptualization to cleaning up after. Her team of 15 volunteers mentioned above, includes musicians, sound system tech, wardrobe, support personal for some of the clients, stage preparation and break down, transport of costumes/props to and from the high school, and more.

Regarding any given show, Sara creates the show theme, organizes the show content such as music/ choreography/dialog, creates the show documentation, does the casting, directs, and organizes an extensive collection of costumes and props kept in 5 large storage rooms at a local facility. Many of the costumes in this collection are or were hand made by Sara and co-founder Charlene along with two other volunteers.

With regard to non show activity, Sara organizes and oversees numerous social events during the year for the special needs community in the southern NH and Merrimac valley areas. Each year PATS sponsors a Halloween costume dance, harvest fest dinner, Valentine's day dance, bowling tournament, spring fling dance, and summer barbecue, as well as trips to see live plays, and trips to the movies. Some of these events serve as fund raisers for the group. She also organizes a yearly golf tournament fund raiser that is well received and supported by the community at large.

Sara handles the all finances and business related issues, such as paying bills, organizing fund raisers, and interfacing with assorted community leaders and vendors.

She regularly corresponds with all the clients via postal mail regarding calender events and sending greeting cards at birthdays and holidays. After each show in memory of Janet Smith, a client who passed away, Sara awards the "Shining Star Awards" on stage to those clients that demonstrate group spirit, personal growth, and effort that so defined Janet's time in PATS.

Every spring, PATS awards \$1000 scholarships to the high school seniors who volunteer for PATS and are entering college. Also, each year, in memory of Ron Simonsen a client who

passed away, scholarships are given to all PATS clients who apply, with the specific intent of defraying the costs for summer camp tuitions.

2. Volunteerism Impact: How has the nominee improved the lives of others in the community through his/her volunteer work? Please describe why the service(s) meets a need in his/her community and what impact it has had.

Answers to this question should: Provide a clear picture of the existing community need, the volunteer's response to that need and how their volunteerism positively makes a difference towards meeting that need.

In New Hampshire, when a special needs child reaches their 21st year, they are no longer enrolled in their respective school system and are ineligible to receive the services provided by the school systems. There are local and state wide organizations that provide valuable services and programs for these mature disabled citizens. These programs primarily include physical therapy, night school, occupational training, socialization groups, and respite services.

Unfortunately the challenges associated with serving a client base with such a wide spectrum of disabilities coupled with budget restraints does affect the quality of services rendered by these well intentioned and committed organizations. Invariably, some clients don't exactly fit the model and fall through the cracks. Under Sara's leadership, PATS strives to and does indeed help fill many of these voids in such a way as to augment the existing services that are offered.

When Sara's son Jason's went through this transition, Sara encountered this scenario head on. She researched all the local and state programs that could possibly help her son to continue growing as a mature disabled man. Jason's particular disability however restricted his options at the time, and the services that were within his capacity to participate were limited. Sara wanted more for her son.

During her investigation, Sara got to personally know most of the special needs community in southern NH, including special needs service providers, administrators and many disabled citizens and their families. She saw that there were other clients experiencing the same dilemma as her son Jason. Something was missing, and she wanted more for her son and the developmentally disabled community in general.

Sara's love of theater, her perspective regarding the services available for the mature special needs community, and the catalyst of a mother's love for her son, all led to her epiphany. The following is the mission statement composed by Saranne Brown in 2000. This mission statement can be found at "www.playamongthestars.com"

Play Among The Stars Theatre Groupe, Inc. shall be a non-profit, non-sectarian, non-political voluntary corporation organized under the laws of New Hampshire and designed to serve the Developmentally Disabled. The purpose of this corporation is to enhance social skills, to provide a knowledge of performing arts, dance and music ability, to further develop enrichment skills, such as leisure skills, personal challenges, relationship skills, language skills, physical and motor development, self esteem and confidence, and to have a sense of being involved in their community.

PATS has achieved much success with regard to reaching these goals. Sara continues to receive respect, admiration, appreciation, and support from the Southern NH and Merrimac valley communities at large..

3. Commitment to Volunteerism: In what ways has the nominee demonstrated a strong commitment to volunteerism and community service? Please provide specific examples of ways in which the nominee has shown extraordinary dedication to improving the community and challenges the nominee may have faced and overcome to continue his/her volunteer work.

Answers to this question should: Provide a clear picture of the nominee's commitment to service.

Undoubtedly in the beginning, Sara's primary motivation was her son's development. She worked hard to find a program that could provide a meaningful experience and the best possible outcome for him. Her commitment to his well being often led to disappointing and discouraged sentiment. After exhausting all other options, she concluded it was time to act.

The first hurdle she overcame was startup capital. The primary expenses for the group being transportation of clients, liability insurance, storage facility for costumes, and the bi-annual high school auditorium fee for janitorial and audio-visual personal. With the help of her team of volunteers, Sara solicited the community at large for donations, and organized numerous fund raisers including bean suppers, yard sales, raffles, and golf tournaments in order to get PATS off and running. Sustaining financial support continues to be the primary challenge for the group.

To most succinctly understand the nature of Sara's commitment and dedication to theater group, one must get to know the clients who participate in the group. The majority are in their 30's, with a range from under 10 yrs to over 65 yrs. Most return year in year out, some have moved away, two have passed away, some no longer able to participate physically. Due to word of mouth, a few new clients enroll each year. They come to sing, dance, act in skits, recite dialog, and perform comedy. The support and camaraderie they exhibit for each other is infectious to all who witness it. They come to perform, they take pride in putting on a good show, and take the responsibility of learning their respective parts seriously. The performances on "show night" are the highlight of the season, and each client brings their "A" game with a focus and sense of purpose not unlike that of any high school production. The appreciation they receive from typically sold out audiences gives them all a sense of accomplishment and pride that is clearly evident.

Thanks to Sara's commitment, devotion and love, the group has thrived collectively and individually. Some clients come into the group shy and unsure of themselves, but soon after, they become enthusiastic and want to participate. A few clients have come to the group with social skills that were lacking, and within weeks they were making friends and participating. A very few clients did not make it into the group due to behavioral issues, and not for a lack of trying by Sara and the group to accept them.

For everyone in the group, from clients to parents to volunteers, and last but not least Sara,

PATS has and continues to be a positive, nurturing, relevant, and fulfilling portion of their lives.

At this time, if I may, I defer final comment on Sara's dedication to volunteerism until the encore section 5 of the essay.

4. Lead by Example: What sets the nominee apart and makes him/her deserving of recognition? Does the nominee lead and organize a team of volunteers? Does the nominee encourage and recruit others to volunteer?

Answers to this question should: Provide a clear picture of how the nominee is an exceptional example of following Myra Kraft's example of being an lifelong volunteer.

Sara's vision as exemplified in the mission statement above, though a labor of love (her words not mine), did not come to fruition without the help of others (paraphrasing but once again her words not mine). Speaking as a long time volunteer, it was Sara's vision, energy, and execution of plan, that provided all the impetus that I and I'm sure others needed to become involved. When I first joined the group, the performances were relatively simple and unsophisticated. Through the years, it was and is Sara's drive to improve every aspect of the performances that, in my mind exemplifies her leadership qualities.

She continually encourages each client to improve themselves, be it learn a new song, a dance step, or memorize lines. They all try to meet the goals she sets, many exceed them, and all work to the best of their abilities to please her.

As for the volunteers involved in the production of a show, their respective roles are fairly well defined and have been honed over the years. Sara's drive for improvement continues to inspire here as well regarding the quality of the audience's experience. She fosters a strong teamwork approach and creates an environment that is a joy to be part of. After each show the consensus among the audiences and volunteers is invariably "that was the best show yet."

Outside of the show production endeavors, are the numerous functions and events that PATS either sponsors or participates in. It's here that Sara's ability to inspire is readily observable.

With regard to assorted dances, BBQ, and parties sponsored by PATS, many volunteers come forward to help with setup, cleanup, donate raffle items, bake goodies, and play live music.

The PATS annual golf tournament draws a number of volunteers who give up most of their day to make the tournament a success.

Each year the global Knights of Columbus Tootsie Roll Drive raises millions for the mentally challenged, and is well represented by PATS. Last year alone Sara solicited and provided 37 volunteers (including herself) for the Salem and Pelham NH drives bringing thousands of dollars for local KoC.

In years past, PATS has entered a float in the Salem NH Christmas parade. A truck and driver were donated by a local business man, and PATS volunteers would prepare the truck with railings, benches, decorations, prepare clients in costume, and set up a sound system to

play Christmas carols. Between the preparations, the parade, and break down of the float, it took 6 hours and 10-12 volunteers. For 6 years, this was a popular event for some of the clients, but is now no longer feasible due to the large number of clients who now want to participate, the size of the truck that is available, and the related safety issues with both.

5. Encore: Please feel free to provide one additional page if there is anything else that you would like to share about your nominee.

In closing, I'd like to present one more detail as to Sara's commitment and dedication to the developmentally challenged communities of Southern NH and Merrimac Valley.

A career change made by Sara's husband Rod in 2001, necessitated a move from Salem NH to Windham, Maine. Sara's commute had increased exponentially from under 10 miles to 100 miles taking up to 2 hours 15 minutes each way. More recently in 2008, they moved again from Windham, Maine to Scarborough, Maine reducing her commute to 80 miles or 1 hour 30 minutes each way, each week and at night. I don't think I can give a better example that demonstrates her commitment and dedication to the community than that.

On behalf of myself and Play Among the Stars Theatre Group, we thank you for taking the time to hear Saranne Brown's story. And God bless the Kraft family for all the wonderful things you do for New England.