

Artists sharing skills with special-needs, disabled residents

By **BETTY WUND**
Special to the Star and Wave

VILLAS — With so many art experiences around us, it is most impressive to see how the special people in the county are contributing art to their surroundings. Some very gifted people are working and volunteering to make life better for those who must rely on others to make their days more interesting and happier.

At the Lower Township Branch of the Cape May County Library in Villas, art classes are sponsored by Easter Seals for the disabled and special-needs residents from group homes and private homes. Once a month they gather for art lessons with Cheryl Crews. A former art education teacher, Crews knows from personal experience how to relate to her class. She grew up with a disabled sister and learned so much of the sacrifices families make to help their children achieve what they can, she said.

"I played Parcheesi with my sister who was extremely handicapped. I would put a die in her hand, it would drop and I made the move," Crews said. "Even the family dog took part in the game."

Crews is able to relate to those who seem distant or withdrawn. She assigns a task such as tearing out papers and handing them to others in the class to someone that seems withdrawn. Crews knows her group well. She knows what they can do. They don't refuse



Betty Wund/Special to the CAPE MAY STAR AND WAVE
Myriam Ramirez and Carol Valentine, activities directors at Victoria Commons, hold arrangements the residents helped put together for Mardi Gras.

to follow her instructions when asked.

"Even a simple movement improves their motor skills," Crews said.

The project in one class session was to stamp shapes on paper using a stamp pad and a cork, and adding shapes attached to the end of the corks. Another was to roll the ink on leaves and press them on paper to make leaf patterns on a page. One of the happy outgoing adults expressed how she felt about this class at the library.

"The Lower Cape May Library is the best place to learn," she said.

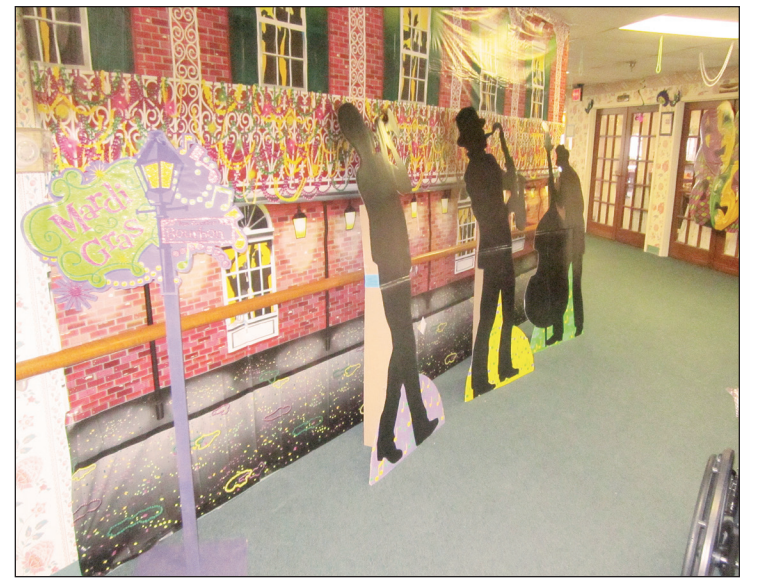
Down the road a bit in North Cape May, Carol Valentine, the activities director at Victoria Commons, and her assistant, Myriam Ramirez, are enthusiastic about their celebration of Mardi Gras through art. Residents of the assisted living facility have been decorating masks with glitter for arrangements.

With decorations in the halls by the dining room, including the all-season tree decorated with strings of Mardi Gras beads, they are looking forward to Fat Tuesday on Feb. 17. They will celebrate with doughnuts — not the traditional pancakes

— and a lot of singing and dancing on the part of the activities staff, according to Ramirez.

With the hall to the dining room decorated with a scene of Bourbon Street and the festive Mardi Gras arrangements for the facility's staff, it proves to be a fun time, the ladies said. In fact, the staff is going to have a "Snatch and Steal Day." The object will be to take the arrangements from another staff station to their station. The winner will be the staff group that gathers the most arrangements.

In a more challenging atmosphere at Victoria Manor nurs-



The hallway leading to the dining room has been decorated with strings of Mardi Gras beads and other items to create the appearance of Bourbon Street in New Orleans.

ing home, Paige Cunningham is bringing a group of residents into the world of art through some special projects. A piece of paper and a pair of scissors is enough to start a patient working on just a shape, Cunningham said. Put those shapes together and a collage like a Matisse work of art emerges. Inspired by Matisse, their collage "Jungle" hangs in the entryway of the facility.

"They think they are doing nothing until all the shapes are put together and they are thrilled with the result," Cunningham said. "It's a matter of figuring out what the patients are capable of doing so they can participate."

With a background in early childhood education, she has as many as 20 patients meet with her in the main dining room of the manor or with a small group in the smaller dining areas. They work with pastels, oil and watercolors. Cunningham said she plans to have an art show in the spring to display other work that her group has done. They are as proud of their accomplishments as she is of them.

"It's wonderful to see how they brighten up when a volunteer comes into the manor and works with them on a project. They are thrilled when they can do something," Cunningham said.

Surplus

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said while he didn't agree with Inderwies' overall number, he would like to use more surplus for tax relief.

Cape May's surplus is tied to the success of the tourist season, which can be affected by weather, gas prices and the national economy, Mahaney said.

City Tax Assessor Mike Jones said the total taxable value of buildings and land in the city was \$2.8 billion. He said the city had about \$5.5 million in new assessments

added in 2014.

Mahaney said the city's ratable base recovered from recession levels in 2008-09.

Inderwies said the 2015 budget contains three new city positions: information technology, clerical and an in-house engineer for which money was "being moved around."

He said while these positions may be of importance to the operation of the city government, he felt a \$70,000 reduction in the salary and wage budget for the city's Fire Department was of upmost

concern.

"This deals with the health, safety and welfare of our residents and visitors," he said.

Inderwies, who worked for the Fire Department for 26 years (10 years as chief), said it needs additional staff.

In the past, as a department head, he requested additional personnel for the Fire Department, he said. If \$70,000 is left in the budget, the salary and wage budget for the Fire Department would remain the same as last year, Inderwies said.

"The firefighters union in the last contract negotiations made many concessions, including lower salaries for new hires and increasing the amount of steps to achieve top salary, which is a cost savings to the city," he said.

Nearly one-third of the salary and wage budget in the Fire Department is offset by EMS transport fees, Inderwies said. He said increased staffing would reduce overtime and the department not having to rely on part-time staff, which would save the city money.

Inderwies said volunteerism was on the decline both nationally and in Cape May, adding

that the department has six or fewer volunteer firefighters.

"At one time the city relied heavily on volunteer staff to supplement the career department," he said. "That is no longer the case."

MacLeod said Cape May had a mature employment population meaning a number of employees are reaching 20 plus years of service.

"As such, they have reached higher levels of pay grade so when we do have someone retire and that individual is replaced by someone at the new end of the starting salary, traditionally through the years those savings have been recognized in the next year's budget," he said.

MacLeod said the \$70,000 Inderwies was referencing was not an intended reduction of manpower. He said the \$70,000 was not a cut in the salary and wages budget for the Fire Department but a savings based on an employee retiring at a high level of pay being replaced with an entry-

level employee.

Inderwies said he was aware of the retirement.

The Fire Department has 14 employees including the chief, according to MacLeod. He said the city was in the process of going through civil service hiring requirements to bring on the 14th staff member. MacLeod said the \$70,000 reduction in the line item between the 2014 and 2015 budgets was generated by the change in staff.

He asked if adding the \$70,000 back into the salary and wage budget would cover hiring one or two individuals including health benefits.

"I see this as the perfect opportunity to grow the department and not staying status quo," Inderwies said.

Mahaney said council in the coming year should study the police and fire departments to determine their long-term needs. He said the city's interlocal agreements to provide police services to Cape May Point and West Cape May expire at the end of the year.

Council will introduce the budget at its Feb. 17 meeting, scheduled to begin at 7 p.m.

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