

NEWS RELEASE

Wilfrid Laurier University



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ARTS EXPRESS '96: "Invisible Therapy for challenged children"

They came in wheelchairs or used crutches. Some had cerebral palsy. Others were autistic or developmentally delayed. They all had special needs, and they all came together, one day last summer, to put on a show.

"We had drama, music, dance and creative activities of all sorts," says Dr. Leslie O'Dell, co-ordinator of Wilfrid Laurier University's theatre program, whose vision was responsible for last year's Arts Express pilot project.

"We had a unifying theme: A jungle safari. The children, many of whom were affiliated with The Rotary Children's Centre, developed the story, painted the backdrop, made masks, composed music, and created their own dance. It was wonderful! The week before was terrifying, exhausting and exhilarating, but the children's gala performance was just incredible!"

It was also the first of what may become an annual integrated arts camp that encourages special needs children aged six to 14 to express themselves through the arts.

Arts Express '96, which will take place the week of July 22-29, is the second stage in what is becoming a valuable community partnership. While still very much a pilot project, O'Dell says, the arts camp concept now embraces Laurier's theatre and music therapy programs, the dance program at the University of Waterloo and the Carousel Dance Studio, the early childhood education program at Conestoga College, and the recreation therapy program at the Rotary Children's Centre.

The project will also involve volunteers from high schools and various university and high school programs, as well as parents.

For the kids, the thrill of putting together and taking part in a musical production may be rewarding enough. But the parents, educators and therapists involved in the project are also learning and contributing.

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A child who may not like to exercise but enjoys moving to music "might discover an affinity for dance" following involvement in Arts Express, says O'Dell. "It opens possibilities. Parents said they found their children becoming connected to music or movement" following last year's production.

Educators and other people involved with special needs children will also welcome a new half-credit course, Creative Arts for Children with Special Needs, being offered jointly by UW and WLU. The course will run for evenings in July and will culminate with the Arts Express production

Last year's Arts Express was so successful that the 40 spots were filled within days. Spaces still remain for Arts Express '96 but are expected to be filled quickly.

On Monday, March 11 at 9 a.m., the partners of Arts Express will hold a special kick-off event to celebrate the event and talk about hopes and plans for the future. Participating will be some of the children who took part in the first Arts Express, as well as sponsors, and representatives from the four partner institutions involved.

The media are warmly invited to this event, being held at the **Rotary Centre, 500 Hallmark Drive, Waterloo**. It promises good photo possibilities, good people to talk to, and a good story about an exciting and worthwhile project.

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