

ArtStream Attracts Greater Involvement

Adults with disabilities take to the stage.

By [Orrin Konheim](#)

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Xandra Karen Matel, a 34-year-old student with special needs at Montgomery College, is involved in a program at Gunston Theater with other adults with special needs who like to act. Thanks to ArtStream, there's also a live audience present.

"I think it's fantastic to see these people get to do what they love," said audience member Christine Newton.

ArtStream Inclusive Companies is a non-profit organization that makes the arts available to everyone with disabilities by putting them in plays. Their two-week run at Gunston Theater, which ended last weekend, marked its fifth season in the Washington D.C. area.

"The shows get better every year and this year is no exception," said ArtStream's media consultant Luke Warren.

This year ArtStream performed two plays with two separate casts. "Happily Ever After" was a non-traditional look at the fairy tale love story and "Mystery of the Well" was a fusion of the Chicago gangster and Bollywood genres.

Because each cast member has a very specific set of strengths and weaknesses, the play's script is developed from scratch to accommodate each cast member.

"It's totally outside of anything I've ever done," said Raimee Gentry.

Gentry was one of three mentors who acted alongside the actors with disabilities in rehearsals and on stage as a means of extra support. She first got into the program because she just wanted to act.

"I think people have a perception that certain acting talent can only exist in a certain kind of person," said Gentry. "There's some natural charisma that can't be taught but at the same time, there's things that can be taught."

The group of mentors and actors collaborate together on the process. They initially vote on a storyline. The director then does a series of improvisations and tapes them. The script is worked out from there.

The actors come from all over the D.C. area. As with most theater productions, there are auditions which means all the actors on stage must prove themselves before they go up on stage.

"We want them to have the experience of going through an audition," said Warren.

In addition to friends and family, the play's audience drew mostly from people who were involved with the disability community in one way or another. The producers of "Mystery of the Well" invited select members of the community, including the regional director of the Special Olympics and Del. Pat Hope, to have an on-stage cameo in the role of the genie.

ArtStream hopes to expand their audience even further and added a fifth company this year.

Aisha Salem, ArtStream's vice chair and one of the mentors in the play, has noticed that the word of mouth has been increasing.

"It's a very tight-knit community and when one person has fun and tells all of his friends, they all want to be involved," said Salem.

The Silver Spring Company begins its performances on April 29 and the Gaithersburg Companies begin performing on June 17. For more information, visit www.art-stream.org.



In "Happily Ever After," the actors are, from left, Nick Kramp, Tammy Kiser and Mark Jones.