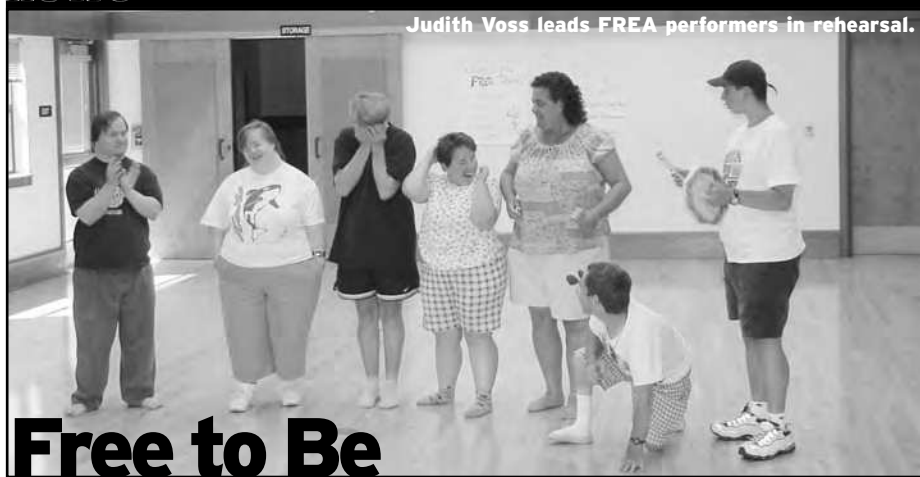




Free to Be

Quiet community finds voice.

Ricky Anderson has never performed in public. But in late October, he and 16 other adults with developmental disabilities will take the stage in front of 300 strangers.

Anderson is part of a performance group called Freedom Through Release, Expression and the Arts (FREA, pronounced "free"). Formed this June, FREA has 17 members, all adults with developmental disabilities, and a waiting list of others eager to participate. The brainchild of two deeply passionate women, FREA provides a forum for self-expression to a group typically ignored, or at best, misunderstood, by the general public.

For Anderson, the show is about more than acting. In March, a car struck Anderson, 39, as he crossed 6th and Olive in his handicapped cart. The driver leaned out the window and yelled that he was out to get disabled people. Then the car sped away, leaving Anderson with a leg pinned under the cart, neck injuries and bruises.

"That's why I really want to get involved with this program," Anderson says. "I'm doing it because it helps to get the feelings of handicapped people across to others. It tells them to be aware that we're out there."

Although having a developmental disability may mean some cannot live on their own or have a traditional job, it doesn't necessarily mean they have a low IQ.

But as schoolyard slang shows, many people automatically equate a developmental disability with stupidity, according to Karla Schroeder and Judith Voss, social workers and founders of FREA. They add that many people also assume that an adult with a developmental disability is somehow incapable of feeling everything that a "normal" adult feels. For example, there's the fallacy that people with Down's syndrome are always happy. "The 'happy Downs' — that just drives me crazy," says Schroeder.

The women's desire to break such misconceptions through the use of performing art first brought them together. Schroeder holds a BA in developmental psychology and has danced for 20 years. She works at a brokerage firm for disabled adults. Voss, whose daughter, 22, is developmentally disabled, holds a doctorate in education and a masters in counseling psychology, and has spent years organizing recreational groups for the disabled. A common friend introduced the two in June, and FREA was born.

While several programs exist to support children with disabilities, Voss's experience with her daughter taught her that programs for adults are few and far between. That's the gap that FREA aims to fill, says Voss. At FREA re-

hearsals, adults get a chance to sing, dance and act — whichever they like to do most. Exercises are not scripted, so they can be modified for all levels of ability.

Both Voss and Schroeder are convinced of the importance of using the arts to allow people to express themselves. One doesn't have to use words, says Schroeder, when one can just as easily use paintings or slideshows or movement. "What happens if someone isn't able to communicate verbally?" she asks. "They can't be in a play?"

FREA's first performance is fast approaching on Oct. 23 at the Eugene conference of the Oregon Rehabilitation Association. As "just the tip of the iceberg," the show will present a simple repertoire of exercises, including a group song, to avoid any pressure on members. "This is a fledgling process," says Voss.

Cynthia Defferding, 44, and Mark Schrouder, 29, FREA members and high school graduates, say they're excited about their upcoming performance. Other FREA members admit they're nervous, but appreciate what they're part of. "I really want this group to grow and become part of my future," says Rachel Zalewski, 26, FREA member and a graduate of Sheldon High. "I've always wanted to be a dancer and actress."

In recent exercises, FREA members have practiced telling a story not through literal narration but through the use of impressions created by sound and movement. It's an abstract concept that requires special effort for many members.

Through such exercises, the group works inwardly to build self-esteem and communicate feelings in a creative and open way. And as a result, FREA hopes to raise community awareness and break stereotypes.

Funding, as ever, is tight. Both Schroeder and Voss volunteer their time, and Schroeder's employer has helped print programs and mailings. The Hilyard Community Center donates space to the group, but is only available for rehearsals twice a month. Voss and Schroeder would love a space to call FREA's own and to rehearse weekly.

FREA also needs donations for costumes, props and adaptive equipment such as mats and space balls. Mats would allow members in wheelchairs to get down on the floor. "Wouldn't that be exhilarating, to explore space in a totally different way?" asks Schroeder.

"This program is important to me, because I just like being myself," says Anderson. "Sometimes I feel sad and all alone because of things going on in my life. I just like singing because it helps me to express my feelings."

FREA is open to new members. Call 485-0808 or 284-5070. **EW**



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