

Llife

**VOLUNTEER
NATION**
A MONTHLY SERIES

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AND THE ABLE-BODIED
TEAM UP TO SHOWCASE
THEIR TALENTS **G4**

THE ART *of* INCLUSION

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Back in full swing

A SUCCESSFUL REAL ESTATE MAN SINGS AGAIN **G21**



NEWSDAY / THOMAS A. FERRARA

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"I am only one, but still I am one. I cannot do everything, but still I can do something; and because I cannot do everything, I will not refuse to do the something that I can do."

— Edward Everett Hale

Designed to be seen



Collage artist Hedi Flickstein is executive director and co-founder of Princess Ronkonkoma Productions.

Group showcases work of local artists — including those with disabilities

VOLUNTEER NATION A MONTHLY SERIES

BY JIMIN KIM
Special to Newsday

When Hedi Flickstein makes a collage, it's more than a collection of patriotic decorations of the American flag and vintage stamps. It symbolizes her resilience.

Flickstein, who lives in Coram, has congenital spinal problems that make it difficult for her to move, and constant bending to pick up pieces for the collages takes its toll, she said. "Other than that, I think it's just very comforting."

She also hasn't allowed her disability to limit her role as executive director of Princess Ronkonkoma Productions, a Suffolk County-based nonprofit art collective whose volunteers also contribute the artwork that is displayed in public venues, such as libraries and town halls.

Flickstein started the nonprofit in 2001 with the group's president, Brian Burns, 60, a former Lake Ronkonkoma resident. The organization provides an artistic outlet for about 35 poets, artists and photographers. Some, like Flickstein, have physical disabilities. Their works are exhibited by Princess Ronkonkoma Productions at no charge.

Flickstein said it's especially



ON THE COVER Painter and poet Maria Iliou, who is autistic, contributes her work to multiple Princess Ronkonkoma Productions shows each year.

important to showcase the creative nature of the group's members with disabilities, along with the works of their colleagues who have no physical limitations.

"People, in general, feel if someone is disabled they're useless," said Flickstein, who has been making artwork that is displayed with other work by the group since it began. "We try to show the public all the beautiful things we're doing."

Maria Iliou, a painter and a poet, has helped highlight the group's talents since she joined in 2002. Iliou, 50, has autism and arthritis, but neither condition has stopped her from including her work in almost three shows exhibited



NEWSDAY / THOMAS A. FERRARA

Maria Iliou paints in her West Babylon home. "Princess Ronkonkoma Productions gives me a chance to show people what I can do," says the artist and poet.



HEATHER WALSH



HEATHER WALSH

Hedi Flickstein's collages in the series "Stars and Stripes" have a patriotic theme.

by Princess Ronkonkoma Productions each year. She said the nonprofit doesn't regard those with disabilities as being incapable of making something beautiful.

"We're very gifted," said

Iliou, who lives in West Babylon. "We just process things differently than other people do."

She said painting and poetry help her relax and express herself. The walls of her home

provide a gallery for 38 of her paintings. She has presented almost all of them — many illustrating scenic landscapes from photos she has taken — at the nonprofit's exhibits.

"Princess Ronkonkoma

Productions gives me a chance to show people what I can do," Iliou said. "My gift, my art, my poetry. . . . I will continue to work with them as long as I can."

The group's latest exhibition is on display on the second floor of Brookhaven Town Hall in Farmingville. Flickstein is showing 14 of her framed pieces there in a collection titled "Stars and Stripes." Her artwork reflects themes honoring the nation's armed services and the Statue of Liberty. Flickstein said her brother served in the Vietnam War, her father in World War II.

The artwork will be up for about three more months.

"These . . . artists are trying to do something educational and cultural to benefit the town," said Supervisor Edward P. Romaine. "It's our way of signaling every life counts. It doesn't mean if you're handi-

capped you can't make a contribution."

Inspiring others

Cindy Burget, an artist with disabilities, has nine paintings in the exhibit reflecting Americana themes of country life and quilt designs.

On a recent afternoon, the artwork seemed to have the intended effect on at least one attentive viewer — Leon Wilson, 54, of Coram. Wilson is in constant pain because of spinal disc problems and bone deterioration. But he said the exhibition reminded him that he used to paint wildlife when he was younger, and he was inspired by the art at Town Hall.

"I can do that, I know I can do that," Wilson said. "I just got to get that kick — and this is an incentive for me to see what someone like that can do: find a passion."

See COVER STORY on G6

The art of exposure



Judy Turek, who first volunteered for Princess Ronkonkoma Productions in 2006, now hosts the group's annual poetry contest.



Kevin O'Connell's photograph "Locomotive No. 35 Leaving Eisenhower Park" is part of the Brookhaven Town Hall exhibit.

HEATHER WALSH

COVER STORY from G4

It's moments like these that motivate Flickstein. She finds venues for the group's presentations and helps set up the collections at each location.

"Even though we're not getting a salary and we're not swimming with oodles of money, I feel we've accomplished something quite beautiful and appreciated by a lot of people," she said.

Burns has been by Flickstein's side, helping to lead Princess Ronkonkoma Productions since 2000, when it was a movie production team. But plans to make a film about the 17th century folklore of Princess Ronkonkoma failed when the team couldn't raise enough money to film on location.

Princess Ronkonkoma, as legend goes, was the daughter of the chief of the Setauket Sachem tribe, one of the American Indian tribes bordering Lake Ronkonkoma in the mid-1600s. According to the Lake Ronkonkoma Historical Society, the Indians considered the waters of Lake Ronkonkoma — the largest freshwater lake on Long Island — sacred.

There are many versions of the Princess Ronkonkoma legend, including one that says she drowned herself because her father forbade her to marry the European settler she loved. Burns, who moved last year to Deerfield Beach, Florida, still pitches in, writing fliers for the nonprofit and promoting it online to Long Island towns.



Sara Ford, 21, of Port Jefferson, left, walks through the exhibition on the second floor of Brookhaven Town Hall. A folk art painting, above, by Cindy Burget, an artist with disabilities, is one of the works on display.

HEATHER WALSH

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Volunteer Spotlight

Kevin O'Connell

Kevin O'Connell's love for photography began when he was very young, and it has taken him to the rooftops of New York City.

"As a child, I used to love photo essays in Life magazine," said O'Connell, 73, of Rocky Point. "Eugene Smith was my model. I used to love to look at his stories, his picture stories. So, I said, 'Let me try to do my own stories.'"

In 1968, he returned from serving in the Army during the Vietnam War, where he worked as a topographical surveyor. He soon bought a camera and got a job as a survey assistant for the Port Authority of New York and New Jersey at the construction site of the Twin Towers. During lunch breaks and after work, O'Connell would go to the top floor of a building at the towers' construction site and shoot pictures of the skeletal frames from about 20 stories high.

"I'd go any place for a picture," O'Connell said about his World Trade Center photos. "I took pictures most people wouldn't have access to."

Those prized photos led O'Connell to Princess Ronkonkoma Productions. O'Connell wanted to print the pictures larger than he was able to produce them in his own darkroom. In 2010, he met Stuart McCallum, a Princess productions photographer and Ridge resident, who helped him make the larger prints.

O'Connell has exhibited his work in about 10 Princess shows, but most of his work for the nonprofit goes unnoticed. He and Princess executive director Hedi Flickstein set up the art exhibitions that feature the work of group members. He culls the selected artwork from a storage facility in Blue Point and takes the carefully wrapped art to the galleries for exhibition. It takes nearly a full day to determine how to set up the different artworks.

O'Connell said he plans to be a part of the Princess group for as long as possible.

"I feel just helping somebody show their work is an award in and of itself," O'Connell said.

— JIMIN KIM



HEATHER WALSH

Sign me up

PRINCESS RONKONKOMA PRODUCTIONS has about 35 members with a penchant for the arts: painters, photographers and poets. The group features the work of its members in public venues and prides itself on displaying the work of artists with disabilities alongside works by other artists. The Princess group, however, draws the line at showing artwork with nudity.

"As handicapped artists, we are

striving to do something educational, cultural and artistically beautiful for our state, county and communities," said executive director Hedi Flickstein. "We hold events that are open to the wide and diverse public of Long Island."

For more information about joining Princess Ronkonkoma Productions, call Kevin O'Connell at 631-744-3012, send an email to prpartists@gmail, or contact Hedi Flickstein at P.O. Box 2508, Lake Ronkonkoma, NY 11779-2508.

You might consider . . .

THE FARMINGDALE CREATIVE WRITING GROUP

Established nearly 60 years ago, the free writing workshop of about 20 active members is led by poet Judy Turek, who also volunteers for Princess Ronkonkoma Productions. Upcoming gatherings will be held from 7 to 9 p.m. on Sept. 9 and 30; Oct. 14 and 28; Nov. 18; Dec. 9 and 23, at the Farmingdale Public Library. "It's a peer-level workshop open to all," Turek said.

Contact: Judy Turek, 516-644-3458; msjjevus@optonline.net

HANDS — Handicapped Adults—New Directions in Suffolk

The nonprofit was founded in 1972, and members must be at least 18. HANDS helps its nearly 30 active members acquire information about legislation, food and nutrition benefits, education and employment. The group meets on the fourth Saturday of the month from 12:30 to 3 p.m. at New Village Recreation Center, 20 Wireless Rd., Centereach.

"We share our experience, our strength and our hope with one another to help solve our common problems and challenges and to help one another overcome handicaps," said Carol Gaggin, HANDS president.

Contact: Carol Gaggin, 631-567-4030; hands.carol@gmail.com

For more volunteer opportunities, contact the **Long Island Volunteer Center** at 516-564-5482; longislandvolunteercenter.org

In addition to Burns, 25 or so people who had worked on the movie with production design and script writing also stayed with Flickstein. In 2001, the members kept the Princess Ronkonkoma Productions name, but turned the company into a nonprofit with a new mission.

Burns' love of poetry motivates him to continue his work long-distance. He has a condition that affects his joints and weakens leg muscles particularly, but he still drives back to Long Island for some of the organization's major shows.

"A disability gives you a completely unique perspective

on humanity and society," Burns said. "You're almost working as an alien in society, so it gives you a wonderful openness about how society works, how human beings work."

Flickstein said it's been tough to find funding for the group to buy its own studio and materials. Recent proposals to secure grants from local municipalities were turned down. "You have many art leagues on Long Island," Flickstein said. "If they do two, three shows a year, that's a lot of shows for them and they do get an awful lot of funding. We're doing between 15 and 22

shows a year. We get, if anything, very minimal funding. . . . We're working on a shoestring."

What Princess Ronkonkoma Productions lacks in funding, it tries to make up in spirit from its dedicated volunteers. Kevin O'Connell, 73, of Rocky Point, an avid photographer, helps Flickstein set up the art exhibitions at various venues. He does the heavy lifting, driving to the group's storage facility in Blue Point to pick up some of the works in the group's collection and brings them to galleries for hanging.

See COVER STORY on G8



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Volunteer Angela Becker assists at the poetry contest awards.

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Stuart McCallum shared his darkroom expertise with another member.

NEWSDAY / J. CONRAD WILLIAMS JR.

Exhibiting many talents

COVER STORY from G6

"It's a privilege to help them," said O'Connell, who has been a member of the group for five years. "Here are people who inspire me. They don't let their disability stop them. They have a passion for life, a passion to create."

O'Connell learned about the nonprofit in 2010 after reading a newspaper story about the group. He met Stuart McCallum, a Princess productions photographer from Ridge, who helped develop photos O'Connell had taken of the construction of the Twin Towers from 1968 to 1970.

O'Connell has featured his own photographs in several of the nonprofit's shows. At the Brookhaven Town Hall exhibition, his collection from nearly 40 years ago portrays one of the last steam trains on Long Island.

Poetry contests and more

Judy Turek, 53, of East Meadow, is a poet who has volunteered for the group since 2006, and her poems have accompanied the artwork of members in previous shows. Writing poetry and typing fliers of upcoming events are special endeavors, she said.

"I think my level of satisfaction is probably greater working with PRP," Turek said. "They're extremely supportive of me and my efforts. This is a way of me supporting their efforts and doing things they're not able to."

In addition to her poems, she hosts the group's annual poetry contest for adults and children and will emcee the event for contest winners Oct. 3 at the Emma S. Clark Library in Setauket.

Angela Becker, 79, a longtime community theater actress who lives in Oakdale, lends her theatrical experience to the poetry contest, with opening and closing remarks. Though not disabled, she can relate to some of the nonprofit's volunteers.

"I have people with disabilities in my own family," Becker said. "So I'm always grateful of anybody who does anything helpful for the disabled. I think for anyone with a disability to carry PRP for all these years, you have to admire them. I mean they just don't stop."

Flickstein and Burns said they'll continue leading Princess Ronkonkoma Productions for as long as they are able, and they agree on one major goal: to secure an exclusive gallery for the artists' collective.

"We . . . try to show the public all the beautiful things we're capable of doing, whether it's poetry or the arts," Flickstein said. "We've been very, very well received."

Burns said the group's objective is to promote talent in everyone — those with and without limitations.

"In art there is no disability because it is all about the individual expression," he said. "We want people to know that there is independence and creativity. Art is self-empowering."