



HIGHEST BIDDER...During the 'Blank Canvas' auction in the Center for Visual Art of New Jersey's Main Gallery, a bidding war took place, as the prices of individual works of art escalated into the 'Thousands.'

Visual Arts Center Introduces 'Blank Canvas' Fundraising Event

By MARYLOU MORANO
Specially Written for The Westfield Leader and The Times

SUMMIT – The Visual Arts Center of New Jersey (VACNJ) in Summit recently featured a new fundraising format for its annual "For Art's Sake" Benefit. This year the Center held a "Blank Canvas Event."

Artists involved with VACNJ in some way over the years were invited to create a piece of art on a blank 12" X 12" piece of canvas. One hundred artists donated either an original work on the canvas, or a work that met the canvas size specifications.

"We reached out to the artists we have been associated with and asked them to create art for us on a blank canvas," explained Mari D'Alessandro, VACNJ's Exhibitions Coordinator, who also assisted with the "Blank Canvas Event" art selection.

"The artists ranged from unknown to those represented by famous galleries," she continued, adding that many of the contributing artists told her that they liked being confined to a 12" X 12" canvas.

"It gave the artists tight parameters, yet allowed them to go wild within them," said Ms. D'Alessandro. "The artwork represented a variety of mediums, from traditional watercolor, pastel, and oil to collage, fabrics and prints. One artist contributed a hand made necklace.

The canvases, which were exhibited in VACNJ's newly renovated Palmer Gallery, were sold at a silent auction on December 2. Each canvas opened with a minimum bid of \$150, with bids raised in increments of \$50.

In addition, a live auction of a few specially selected canvases was held. "All the art sold, either at the 'Blank Canvas Event,' or a few days later," reported Ms. D'Alessandro.

Art Center Trustees Estelle Fournier and Katie Totman co-chaired the "Blank Canvas Event," which featured Honorary Chairperson Patricia Bell and Guest Curator Ann Schaffer. "It is important to celebrate the artists and the artistic in all of us. It is a privilege to chair such an evening," said Ms. Bell.

One hour prior to the official opening of the event, Ms. Schaffer guided attendees of a special V.I. P. reception on a preview tour of the canvases. "Each work speaks differently to

every viewer, a silent language communicating intimate secrets that range from humorous to somber, from simple to complex," she said.

According to Ms. D'Alessandro, the proceeds of "For Art's Sake 'Blank Canvas Event'" will be used to support all VACNJ programs, including exhibits, and educational and outreach services.

For more information about the VACNJ, visit artcenternj.org or call (908) 273-9121.

New Year's Eve Festivities To Feature Broadway Stars

WESTFIELD – On Sunday, December 31, at 7 p.m., the Westfield Symphony Orchestra (WSO) again presents one of New Jersey's most popular New Year's Eve musical celebrations.

This year's performance, *The American Songbook*, stars Broadway veterans Marguerite Willbanks (*Beauty and the Beast*, *The Secret Garden*), David Gagnon (*Les Mis*) and New York cabaret artist Milla Ilieva. New York City Opera's leading baritone, Marcus DeLoach, is also set to make a special guest appearance.

The American Songbook features a revue of American Broadway classics and an insight into the whacky, the tender, the comic and the tragic elements of American musical theater, all rolled up in friendly cabaret style.

This is an event for the whole family; a concert for adults to reminisce to, for kids to enjoy some of the more

peculiar characters to grace Broadway's stage and for all to revel in the theatrical genius of some of the nation's finest professional performers.

Due to sell out audiences over the past five years, the event has moved to the 1,000-seat, recently refurbished, Westfield High School auditorium, now an acoustically modernized hall with the latest lighting and sound equipment, as well as assigned seating.

Tickets, \$30 and \$60, may be purchased directly from the WSO by calling (908) 232-9400 or visiting one of the following WSO ticket outlets: Commerce Bank (560 North Avenue, East); Fast Frame (111 Quimby Street); and Martin Jewelers (12 North Avenue West, Cranford). For further information, call (908) 232-9400, or e-mail wso@westfieldsymphony.org.



Marcus DeLoach

Arts & Entertainment

Dar Williams Concert Raises Money for Keith Knost Trust

By KATIE NEWINGHAM
Specially Written for The Westfield Leader and The Times

WESTFIELD – The Presbyterian Church of Westfield, bursting with Christmas spirit with the alter hosting five Christmas trees, chandeliers draped in garland and wreaths adorning the balcony, opened its doors for a worthy cause last Saturday night, December 16.

The Coffee with Conscience series added a very special bonus concert with performers Dar Williams and Jessica Owen, with the proceeds going to the Keith Knost Special Needs Trust. Ahrre Maros, the man behind Coffee with Conscience for the past seven years in Westfield, added the Dar Williams concert to benefit his friend Keith.

Coffee with Conscience started in September of 2000; Reverend Jeff Markay of the Springfield Emanuel United Methodist Church allowed local talent to perform and bring local communities together, an event that spread to Westfield.

Usually taking place at the First United Methodist Church of Westfield, five local charities benefit from the 10 concerts that are included in the series: The Community Foodbank of New Jersey, The Names Project of Central New Jersey, Home First and Habitat for Humanity.

"This bonus concert is for a childhood friend of mine that I met through youth group at the Summit Unitarian Church," said Mr. Maros. "A lot of people participate in the other charities (in Coffee with Conscience) but not as many for Keith, so this truly is a great opportunity."

On October 31, 2000, Mr. Knost had a tragic car accident. En route to a new job in Louisiana, his car suddenly swerved across two lanes, entering oncoming traffic. His car began to roll for 83 feet and halted when the car met a tree. The accident was believed to be mechanical failure. Mr. Knost's body was removed from the mangled machinery wrapped around the tree.

He sustained a crushed right rib cage, punctured and collapsed lung, broken nose, four broken vertebrae and a partially severed spinal cord, inevitably leaving him paralyzed from the chest down.

Mr. Knost spent many months rehabilitating at the Kessler Institute for Rehabilitation in West Orange, and he now resides at Manor Care in Mountainside. "He's an incredibly artistic and spiritual man," Mr. Maros told *The Leader and The Times*. "Brilliant is the best word to describe him."

The concert began a little after 8 p.m., with a brief introduction from Ahrre followed by Amy Conner, Mr. Knost's sister, reading a letter from her parents saying how grateful they were for all in attendance and for Ahrre's hard work. The letter stated that Mr. Knost was "truly a renaissance man" and that even with his handicap of not being able to walk, his outlook on life has never faltered.

Immediately following the letter reading, Jessica Owen took the stage. Ms. Owen was born in Edmonton, Alberta, Canada, where she lived and developed artistically until 2001, when she moved to America.

When asked by *The Leader/Times* to describe her genre of music, she paused and giggled before saying, "Well, I guess, pop-Americana folk. I don't really fit in a pop category and I don't really fit in a folk category, so I'm somewhere in the middle."

She has two albums out, "Humanisms," released in 1999, and "Ever so Slightly Rearranged," released in 2001.

This was Ms. Owen's first time performing with Dar, who she said was "lovely," but she has played for Ahrre about three or four times previously, she said.

Ms. Owen's set consisted of five songs, the first song being one that was not recorded, entitled "Looking for His Eyes." She then cracked a joke about the title of her second album, "You know the Counting Crows album 'August and Everything After' – well, I made it shorter than that." The second song, "These True Things," was featured in a Chelsea Pier campaign.

Singing with just an acoustic guitar, her abrasive strumming allowed the notes to echo through the high ceilings of the church, mixing sweetly with the laughs from the audience through her



Dar Williams

storytelling. "Tonight marks a huge night for me," said Ms. Owen, "It's my first time playing five-months pregnant, so I have to play side saddle."

She also played "This Doesn't Happen Everyday," another unreleased song, which was added upon request from a fan who came to the concert especially to hear that song, followed by "American Highway."

"In the spirit of the (time of) year...I'm going to play a song that needs no introduction," she said before playing the familiar chords to "The Little Drummer Boy."

Ms. Owen's sound lacks uniqueness, but her perky demeanor makes up for the at times lack of originality in her playing and predictability of her lyrics. There is nothing to dislike about her; in general she was very pleasant, but not someone to write home about.

Mr. Maros came out once more to introduce Dar, who he said was a perfect fit with Coffee with Conscience. Dar came out and began strumming away dressed in all black with her hair in a perky bun atop her head. After the first chord was released an audience member cheered and Dar said, "No, not that one – it's a prequel to that one, thank you George Lucas."

Born Dorothy Snowden Williams in 1967, she's known for her folk-pop style. She has eight CDs out and she has performed with Mary Chapin Carpenter, Patty Griffin, Ani DiFranco, The Nields, Shawn Colvin, Gilryman, Joan Baez and Catie Curtis. Dar is known for her risky writing and outspoken demeanor, which was apparent in her performance this past Saturday.

Bouncing her knees in synch with her guitar strumming and buoyant bun, Dar's soulful voice and effortless singing stirred head bobbing and feet tapping throughout the audience almost instantaneously.

Looking at the Christmas trees placed on either side of her, she cracked a joke about paganism and said, "Welcome Jewish people...We'll try and include all religions tonight and close with a little agnostic psychotherapy."

Her first set consisted of seven songs, including "If I Were You," "Calling the Moon," "The Hudson," "Are You Out There" and "The One Who Knows."

Contagious Drama Spreads A Little Love This Season

WESTFIELD – The Contagious Drama Workshop (CDW) wrapped up a semester with a series of presen-

tations and a short play at the Presbyterian Church of Westfield.

CDW's Creative Dramatics class put on a play that touched on the serious topic of homelessness. The script was inspired by a story that was read in class. The students thought it would make a great play for presentation and went on to develop a script through improvisation.

As a follow up, Beth Painter and her creative students decided to launch a clothing drive to benefit some of the homeless population in Elizabeth.

The students of the CDW do not just learn to perform, they practice the art of being caring and empathetic individuals. Ms. Painter said, "I'm very proud of the accomplishments all my students have achieved this session; they are giving so much of themselves, through their performance and with this clothing drive."

This clothing drive is being done in conjunction with the AGAPE program sponsored by the Presbyterian Church in Westfield. Through AGAPE (which means love), the homeless of Elizabeth are provided with hot meals, bagged lunches and warm clothing. If interested in making a donation for the AGAPE program or becoming an on-site volunteer, contact Priscilla at the Presbyterian Church of Westfield at (908) 233-0301, extension 24.

The Contagious Drama Workshop will begin its winter/spring session on January 24 Classes are for a wide range of ages (4 through teens). For more information and to reserve a space, visit the CDW website at contagiousdrama.com or contact Ms. Painter directly at (917) 836-3740 or contagiousdrama@yahoo.com.

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