

VALLEY NEWS

Out & About: White River Junction-based arts organization inspires creative reuse

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Jamie Rosenfeld, left, and Melanie Adsit, are co-founders and co-directors of rePlay Arts, a new White River Junction-based nonprofit organization. (rePlay Arts photograph) Courtesy photograph



People make crowns and other Pride-themed items during a "Swap, Drop and Shop" event rePlay Arts hosted as part of WRJ Pride in July. (rePlay Arts photograph) Courtesy photograph—Courtesy photograph



Children show off bracelets they created with rePlay Arts during the Hartford Community Coalition's annual Block Party in June. (rePlay Arts photograph) Courtesy photograph—Courtesy photograph

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WHITE RIVER JUNCTION — Melanie Adsit held out two colorful bangles in a dimly lit but impressively organized storage unit in White River Junction.

The bangles were made out of decorated recycled poster tubes. One was covered with Washi tape, the other with yarn. All the materials — as well as the ones lining the

storage unit — were donated to rePlay Arts, a creative reuse arts organization Adsit co-founded with Jamie Rosenfeld, within the last year. The organization’s current home is an office and two storage units in downtown White River Junction.

“Our job is to take that donation and figure out how to transform it,” Adsit said.

And what a transformation the pair have led since they officially launched the project in January and started hosting events this spring. Adsit, 48, and Rosenfeld, 35, who both have backgrounds in art education, managed to tap into multiple Upper Valley values: art, recycling and — perhaps the most important — community.

In some ways, Adsit and Rosenfeld’s partnership seems serendipitous. The pair met when they both worked in the education department at the Whitney Museum of American Art in New York City. Among the shared interests they bonded over was a connection to the Upper Valley: Rosenfeld had attended summer camp in the region, and Adsit’s husband grew up here.

“This had been a place we were planning to return to,” Rosenfeld said during an interview at the nonprofit’s office on Railroad Row.

Rosenfeld, of Norwich, moved to the Upper Valley around six years ago. Adsit and her family relocated to Hanover in March 2020 and stayed for around a year. Afterward, they returned to the city but quickly realized the Upper Valley was where they wanted to be and returned to Hanover. With both living in the area, they started to launch an idea they’d been thinking about for a decade: a “creative reuse” arts organization, the premise of which is to give used materials a second life as works of art.

“There was this real drive that it had to be more than the arts program,” Rosenfeld said. “It had to have an impact.”

In a simple explanation of what the organization does, people donate used fine arts and crafts materials, which are then distributed to the community in various ways. Adsit and Rosenfeld host art workshops, swap/donation meet-ups and give supplies to art educators and other nonprofit organizations in the area. Their programs are always free and open to people of all ages.

From 5 to 8 p.m. this Friday, rePlay will be at the Parking Lot Party at Revolution in downtown White River Junction. People can stop by to make bracelets and also “shop” from rePlay’s selection of donated materials. While they accept monetary donations, their signs read: “Pay-what-you-wish for materials (including totally free!).”

One of the most inspiring parts of the process so far has been watching people drop off donations, Rosenfeld said.

“I think people are trusting that we will get it into the hands of people who are going to use it,” she said.

A big element of that process is working with area nonprofit organizations to figure out what needs rePlay Arts could fill.

“They’re doing it the right way,” Lisa Brahms, executive director of CraftStudies in White River Junction, said in a phone interview. The two organizations hosted a workshop in April during which participants used broken plates to create mosaic planters. “They’re really investing in learning what the community needs and how their resources can best fit within the community. I think that’s really smart.”

rePlay has also collaborated with WRJ Pride, the Special Needs Support Center and COVER Home Repair and Store.

rePlay shares COVER’s mission of keeping useable items out of landfills, Helen Hong, COVER’s executive director, said. COVER is in the process of opening a used bookstore and has come across books it cannot sell due to decay. During a recent First Friday, rePlay and COVER co-hosted an event where people used books to create bookmarks.

“For us what made a lot of sense is their focus on repurposing, and we found that that aligned really well with our store and our store’s own goals,” Hong said in a phone interview.

rePlay Arts is currently under the umbrella of Fractured Atlas, a New York-based nonprofit organization that is serving as its fiscal sponsor. Adsit and Rosenfeld are currently pursuing their own 501(c)(3) status for rePlay and hope to have it completed by the end of the year. They are currently not earning a salary from the nonprofit. Adsit continues to work as an accessibility and educational consultant for museums, while Rosenfeld works as a contractual educator.

Adsit noted that a lot of art-making supplies, particularly packaging, has a lot of waste associated with it, and sometimes materials that are no longer new end up in a landfill instead of finding a new home. During a stop at the storage unit, Adsit pulled out a box of chalk pastels that — while used — still had a lot of life left in them.

“Accessibility and affordability is of utmost importance to us,” Adsit said. As such, one of rePlay’s staple programs has become “Swap, Drop and Shop” events, where people can donate gently used materials. Participants can take materials for free without bringing anything to swap. During the events, Adsit and Rosenfeld have a drop-in workshop, such as the bookmark-making at COVER.

The accessibility efforts include supporting art educators and instructors, who may not have much money to spend on supplies that can often be expensive. They also encourage people to look at nontraditional art materials for potential: In one of their

storage units, there's two pretzel jugs filled with bottle caps that could be used for a robot-making craft.

"I think it's cool that the level of giving that they're willing to do," Brahm, CraftStudies' director, said of rePlay's founders. CraftStudies camp instructors have gotten materials from rePlay.

Adsit and Rosenfeld are also looking to the future: They hope to open a larger space in White River Junction and want to pay artists to host workshops.

"We envision a space where people can come and make art," Rosenfeld said. That environment would also be unstructured, like the events they currently host.

The idea is to get people creating without feeling pressured to follow a certain format or learn a certain skill. Children tend to be a little more daring when it comes to creativity and adults can sometimes get a little too focused on making something that's perfect.

"We want everyone to find their inner artist," Rosenfeld said.

Note: For a detailed list of the types of donations rePlay Arts accepts, visit replayarts.org. Those who are planning on donating more than a few boxes of supplies are encouraged to reach out to the organizers directly before bringing items to a swap meet.

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