

## **History Note – Interact Center marks two decades of service to arts**

by [Access Press Staff](#) // October 10th, 2016

Interact Center for the Arts has served artists with disabilities since 1996 and will mark 20 years of community service with a gala event in November. The nonprofit's mission is to create art that challenges perceptions of disability has opened doors for artists with disabilities and audiences eager to experience their work, who might never have seen the arts as a life choice, but who now see the arts as essential to their humanity.

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With more than 125 artists working in theater and/or studio arts, Interact today is multi-cultural, intergenerational, and embraces the entire spectrum of disability labels. But it began with just one person.

An energetic and visionary woman, Jeanne Calvert, founded Interact. What began as a side project quickly became her central focus. "When I started Interact back in 1996 I knew that art making here would transform our artists' lives. What I didn't realize then that there would be a huge ripple effect – the families, the staff and all of the community that experienced the work of our artists would shift their perceptions of disability," she said. "They would see human potential and creativity. That ripple effect would extend way beyond our own community and beyond as our artists became leaders and traveled the world. The initial vision has grown so much – the power that creativity can bring to an individual and the human experience cannot be measured."

Calvit, who was honored as an "art hero" in 2012 by Minnesota Public Radio, began working with people with physical and developmental disabilities in 1980, to help pay her bills as a freelance artist. Skills she had learned at the prestigious LeCoq School in France to create summer theater workshops for people with physical and mental challenges.

She told Minnesota Public Radio, "There was a certain point where I just felt like, there are plenty of fabulous theater artists in town and great directors, but what I'm doing, nobody seems to be doing this. And there was a need for it, and it really did transform people's lives," she said. "And not only the artists – the person with the disability – it transformed their family's life, it transformed everyone in their circle's life."

For Calvit, the great lesson of her career has centered on human potential. Time and again she has witnessed people who were treated as broken or worthless discover their hidden strengths through the arts.

“If I had been told that I could only be a secretary, I would have been the worst secretary on the planet,” she said. “There are certain jobs that I would have just failed at miserably because it’s not my talent. And that’s the same for people with disabilities. They all have talents, they all have abilities, and if you don’t give them opportunities, it’s just a loss of human potential.”

Interact’s work is driven by a vision of radical inclusion and collaborations with artists with and without disabilities, from mainstream and marginalized communities, whose stories and life experiences are the grist for original, ensemble-generated theatrical work, and inspire the spectrum of media that are created in its studio. Interact was the first – and remains the only – visual and performing arts organization for artists with disabilities, nationally or internationally, that is creating full-time at the professional level, and sharing exciting seasons of performances and exhibitions with audiences.

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*Access Press* is interested in reader submissions for the monthly History Note column, to complement the articles. Submissions must center on events, people and places in the history of Minnesota’s disability community. We are interested in history that focuses on all types of disability topics, so long as the history has a tie to Minnesota. We are especially interested in stories from Greater Minnesota. Please submit ideas prior to submitting full stories, as we may have covered the topic before. Contact us at [access@accesspress.org](mailto:access@accesspress.org) or 651-644-2133 if you have questions. The History Note is a monthly column sponsored by the Minnesota Governor’s Council on Developmental Disabilities, [www.mnddc.org](http://www.mnddc.org) or [www.mncdd.org](http://www.mncdd.org) and [www.partnersinpolicymaking.com](http://www.partnersinpolicymaking.com).