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'In the arts passion prevails'

Rimon grants help fund photography and multimedia projects that represent the passions of two local artists

By LUCY ROSE FISCHER

Art, at its best, blossoms out of passion. Two recent projects, which received project support funding from Rimon: The Minnesota Jewish Arts Council, illustrate this fundamental axiom.

Jane Strauss wants to shake people up. As both an artist and a disability advocate, she has created a series of photographs titled *A Part or Apart?* Her goal is simple: to raise awareness and use her art to create dialogue about the response to disability in the Jewish community.

ART MAVEN



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Strauss' images reflect the strengths and challenges of people who have various physical and cognitive disabilities. In one photograph, for example, we see a woman who uses a wheelchair, and is an active and vibrant member of the community. The text accompanying the images notes that when she is sitting, she is just like everyone else. She just brings her own chair.

Strauss has a very personal stake in the issue of disability. A number of her photographs record her son, who

is diagnosed with autism, engaging in Jewish experiences. Her black and white images and the accompanying text reveal the intertwining of positive and negative experiences for her boy.

He needs to touch ritual objects in order to create his own Jewish identity, but sometimes the community can fail to understand his needs and, purposely or not, may exclude him from communal activities. One image, for example, shows him holding a *yad*, a pointer used for Torah reading, with a special fervor.

Strauss' photo-documentary images on disability and inclusion in Jewish life were originally exhibited at the Sabes JCC and included commentary with each image.

"*A Part or Apart?* opened the eyes and hearts of many individuals who saw it," said Shelly Christensen, program manager for the Jewish Family and Children's Service of Minneapolis' Jewish Community Inclusion Program for People with Disabilities. "Jane's exhibit is a visual representation of the importance of including people with disabilities in sacred communities."

Strauss is using the grant from Rimon to enlarge the impact of her work by publishing a book with her photographs and text. She hopes to "raise consciousness and overcome attitudinal barriers about disability."

Robyn Awend, director of visual arts at the Sabes JCC, observed that "having this exhibit turn into a book will serve as a catalyst to those in other faith communities to consider inclusion in the fullest sense of the

word and embrace the endless possibilities of having an entire community become *A Part?*"

Musician and composer Craig Harris also exudes passion about his art. His project, titled *Five Books — First Series: The Journey*, is a multimedia oratorio telling the story of Moses and his personal experience leading his people to freedom. An early version of the oratorio was originally commissioned by the Sabes JCC and produced in its theater in 2008. Harris will now expand the narrative and enlarge on the original music to include a chorus and additional instrumentation.

This project represents something of a turning point in the story of Harris' own career. A graduate of the Eastman School of Music with a Ph.D. in music composition, Harris has been a widely known figure in electronic music.

For many years, while composing on the side, Harris focused on work in arts administration — as executive director of Ballet of the Dolls and, more recently, as managing director and interim director of the nationally renowned Playwrights' Center. Having completed his tenure at the Playwrights' Center, Harris is now focusing on advancing his own creative projects in music and multimedia performance and installation.

Five Books brings together many threads from his artistic life — instrumental and vocal music, digital media,

theater and visual arts.

Clearly, *Five Books* is not just another performance piece for Harris. He sees it as "a fabulous opportunity to delve deeply into biblical stories and



Jane Strauss

Jane Strauss' son, who is diagnosed with autism, holds a yad in a photograph from her exhibit titled *A Part or Apart?*

to explore my own heritage." Funding support from Rimon is a "terrific boost to help me realize that goal."

Five Books will be performed in the spring of 2012 at the Ritz Theater in Northeast Minneapolis.

Rimon: The Minnesota Jewish Arts Council is an initiative of the Minneapolis Jewish Federation. The autumn 2011 deadline for project support applications is 5 p.m. Thursday, Sept. 1 (not a postmark deadline). Guidelines and application forms can be downloaded at: www.rimonmn.org.