

Evanston nonprofit founder wins award for circus theater work

The co-founder of an Evanston nonprofit was awarded a \$25,000 grant Friday for her work teaching and choreographing circus acts in theatrical productions.

Chicago-based 3Arts, an organization that supports female artists, artists of color and artists with disabilities, gave one of its 10 awards of 2014 to Sylvia Hernandez-DiStasi, who helped found The Actors Gymnasium in Evanston.

Hernandez-DiStasi's knowledge in theater and the circus has grown through her experiences as a performer, artist, teacher and choreographer, said Larry DiStasi, her husband and the other founder of the Evanston organization.

"She has also, for the past 20 years, been working in theater and discovering new and exciting ways to integrate circus into dramatic theater," DiStasi said. "She really has developed a unique perspective and ability to make those two different things beautifully work together."

The two formed The Actors Gymnasium with the intent of bringing acrobatics to theater. Housed at the Noyes Cultural Arts Center, 927 Noyes St., the nonprofit has produced and taught physical and circus performance to the community, Evanston youth and Northwestern students since 1995, according to its site.

Hernandez-DiStasi grew up touring as a performer with circuses, which included a three-year stint with the Ringling Bros. and Barnum & Bailey circus, according to her biography on the website.

Since then, she has diversified her experience to include both teaching circus routines at The Actors Gymnasium, where she now serves as artistic director, and producing choreography for "Lookingglass Alice," a production from the Lookingglass Theatre Company, which was started by NU alums.

Her caliber of work in both positions made her a great candidate for the award, 3Arts Executive Director Esther Grimm said.

Hernandez-DiStasi said her circus production made her a unique choice for an award in theater.

"It's actually quite surprising because what I do ... it's kind of an unusual design area that I cover," she said. "The fact that someone nominated me and I won this award is kind of an overwhelming thing for me."

The \$25,000 that Hernandez-DiStasi received will allow her to continue to develop and hone her skills, she said. She wants to be able to attend more classes and physical theater productions to find inspiration for future routines, she said.

Hernandez-DiStasi said she also would like to use the money to travel and learn about circus performances outside of the Chicago area.

"Chicago is pretty unique as far as physical theater goes," she said. "But then I realize I haven't really seen that much outside of Chicago."

When she was first notified she had won the award, she thought she could use the money to afford to stop taking work that paid well, yet was not as rewarding, Hernandez-DiStasi said. However, she realized she loves all the work she does and wouldn't want to halt what she is currently doing in the circus theater business.

"After getting this, I realized that I don't do anything that I don't love to do," she said. "I cannot give anything up."

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