

**"A lot of times society doesn't think people with disabilities can really contribute. If Jason has a message, that is it."**

# Performing Miracles

By Anne Cassidy

**J**ason Ellsworth, age eight, performs Hank Williams songs with a flair: his tiny fingers touch the keys with confidence; his voice imitates the soulful howl of the late country-western singer.

Nadia Holub, age 15, is a star drama student at her high school. Her most recent triumph was playing Scrooge in *A Christmas Carol*.

Terrylene Theriot, age 17, is a dancer, an actress—and has just written her first play.

All three children are remarkable achievers—even more so when you learn that Terrylene is deaf; Nadia is wheelchair-bound with osteogenesis, a bone and growth disorder; and Jason is blind and has cerebral palsy. But it's not the disabilities you remember about these children, it's the abilities.

Their worlds would be darker and more silent had they not had the chance to develop their talents through remarkable programs known as Very Special Arts Festivals. With branches in every state, the programs offer year-long training in arts education and performance which culminate in a festival (usually held in the spring). This year the committee is celebrating its tenth anniversary from May 23 to 26 with a national festival in Washington, D.C.

"All kids need the arts," says Dr. Bebe Bernstein, who coordinates New York's festival, "but handicapped kids need them more."

Very Special Arts Festivals are sponsored by The National Committee, Arts

for the Handicapped, a national organization that helps the disabled *help* themselves—by *expressing* themselves.

Jason Ellsworth will be at the festival, playing songs that he learned by listening to records (*The Sound of Music* is a favorite) and then picking out the melodies and harmonies by ear. Born three months premature, Jason spent his first 28 days in a respirator. "The oxygen he needed to live was more than his eyes could take," his mother, Susan Ellsworth, explains, so he has been blind since shortly after birth. Jason's early struggle to survive (doctors gave him only a ten-percent chance) also left him with cerebral palsy.

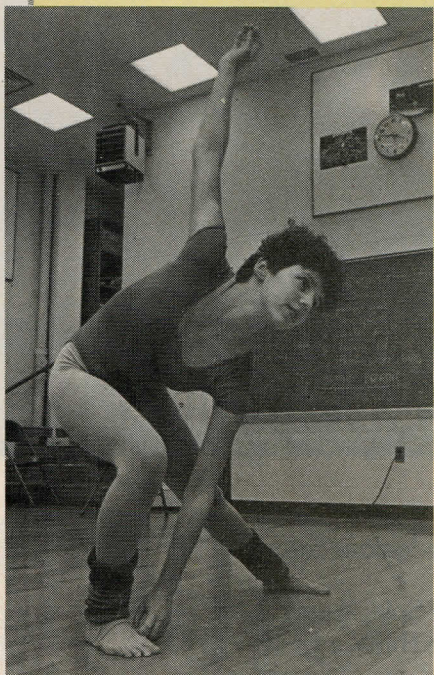
Locked into a dark, confining world, Jason was a very withdrawn baby, afraid to reach out and explore—until his mother began to sit down at the piano with him on her lap and play simple hymns and nursery tunes. Then, she says, "Jason's curiosity got the better of him. First he put his hands on my arms, then on my fingers." Finally, he began to play the piano himself; eventually growing so familiar with the keyboard that he could name each note when it was played. Now a first-grader dividing his time between special and regular classrooms, Jason is a happy child who loves his music and his world.

Although having perfect pitch does have its problems ("Once when I was playing 'The Rainbow Connection,' I jumped right off the piano seat because the singers were off key," Jason says), it has its advantages, too—like being one of only four performers, and the only child, to represent Connecticut in this year's festival.

The chance to develop his talents and poise has made Jason "a very self-assured child," says his mother. "He's not egotistical but he does have the ability to perform in front of people. He would do just about anything to have the crowd respond to him. He's a ham!"

But, she adds, "the fact that he can get up and perform—even though he's physically limited—is an *equalizer*. It makes people take him seriously. A lot of times society doesn't think people with disabilities can really contribute. If Jason has a message, that is it."

It is a message carried by many of the



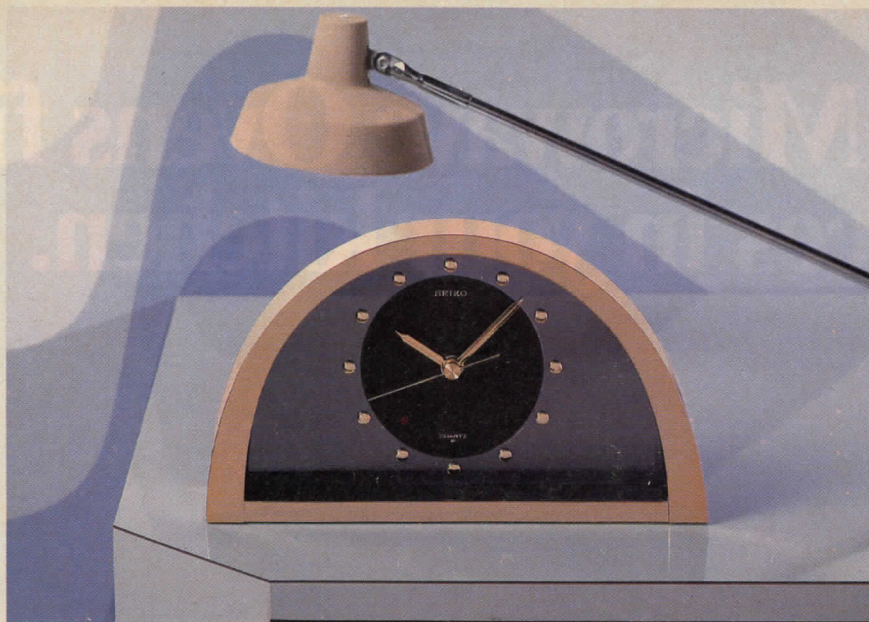
GALLAUDET COLLEGE

**Terrylene Theriot (above) rehearsing a routine and Jason Ellsworth (right) practicing a song in preparation for The National Committee, Arts for the Handicapped festival.**



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Very Special Arts Festival participants, including Terrylene, who will perform in the play *Godspell* at the Washington festival. Like Jason's love of music, her love of dance began at an early age. "When I was very young, maybe four or five, I saw a woman dancing on TV. Of course there was no sound—my whole family is deaf—but I watched the movement and thought, 'This is pretty.' I went to my room and looked at myself in the mirror, trying to move like the woman on TV. I wanted music, but there was no music, so I used my own voice—inventing a song."

Terrylene didn't have the chance to study the arts until she came to Model School for the Deaf, a high school connected with Gallaudet College in Washington, D.C., a liberal arts college specifically for the deaf. "I had gone to different deaf schools and mainstream schools where I learned very little about the arts. There were a limited number of teachers and some public schools didn't offer drama to deaf students. But now I can understand people better. I have more confidence. I've learned to express my ideas better. And I'm less dependent on people because I've learned to develop my art by myself."

Terrylene was especially excited about having the chance to meet some

of the celebrity artists at the festival. Itzhak Perlman, Jamie Wyeth and Alvin Ailey—whose American Dance Theatre Program provides a way for blind and visually impaired students to study dance—are some of the artists who devote time and energy to the program.

Although Terrylene has been deaf since birth, she can hear some sounds, especially low ones, and, she says, "When the music starts, I know." She speaks through a sign-language interpreter, and shows her enthusiasm through a quickness of speech and the easy way she articulates her thoughts.

Terrylene has also written a play called "Imagine" and entered it in the Young Playwrights Festival, another of the committee's special programs done in collaboration with the Foundation of the Dramatists Guild. "So far I've only written one play," she says. "But I'd like to write more. I'd like to write a play where hearing people become handicapped and disabled people become 'normal.' I would include some funny things in this play!"

Nadia Holub's love of drama has been nurtured by a dedicated teacher, Gordon Graham, her mentor at the Human Resources School in Albertson, New York. Graham coached Nadia in such roles as Emily in "Our Town" and also helped her prepare a recital of one

of T. S. Eliot's poems about cats—a performance that won her an invitation to perform on television. Nadia has also been involved in special arts festival programs as an actress—and has recently become interested in directing. "Directing puts you on a different level. It's very rewarding in the end."

Nadia does not use her talent of acting out others' lives as an escape from her own. She is quite aware of the limitations imposed by osteogenesis—the countless broken bones, the stunted growth. "People see me and say, 'Oh, look at the baby,' but if they really look at me, they'd see that I wear makeup," she says proudly and with a typically teenage shrug. "Actually, my height doesn't bother me that much. I'm two feet and ten inches now. My goal is to reach three feet!"

Nadia also recognizes that although she is a star at Human Resources—a special school where physically handicapped children study, swim, cook, sing, learn how to drive, use computers and even live on their own in what is called "The Independent Living Project"—the acting opportunities in the real world may be considerably fewer. "I'm not interested in acting as a career. I'd like to be a financial advisor," she says, with a gleam in her eye.

Like Jason and Terrylene, Nadia seems to have gained more than just an artistic training by developing her talents—she's achieved a clear sense of who she is, disability and all. In fact, she devotes part of her time to helping a young boy who has spina bifida. He's a withdrawn child, she says, "But he'll listen to me."

And thus the cycle is completed: Those who are helped will, in turn, help others. And the arts can provide the momentum, says Bebe Bernstein. The Very Special Arts Festivals touch 500,000 people in 50 states, but, she says, "There are 100,000 kids in New York City alone with special needs." She hopes that many of the programs sponsored by the National Committee, Arts for the Handicapped will become models for local spin-offs across the country. And then there will be music for those who cannot see; movement for those who cannot hear; and new lives for them all.

If your child—or anyone you know—is handicapped and would like to get involved in a Very Special Arts Festival, contact The National Committee, Arts for the Handicapped, Education Office, John F. Kennedy Center for the Performing Arts, Washington, D.C. 20566; phone (202) 332-6960 or TTY (phone for the deaf) (202) 293-3989. They will tell you about the programs in your area.