

# Fully engaged

## Society is hitting on all cylinders whenever Culture Club convenes

By LESLIE WALTERS

"It's a strike!" David Simonet jumped for joy and shouted to his friends. He and 20 other developmentally disabled adults were bowling on a recent Saturday afternoon with 10 local high school students at the Church of St. Francis' lanes.

The bowling party was hosted by the Community Cultural Center, a program based in the St. Paul Public Schools' Riverside Education Center at West 7th Street and Lexington Parkway. The Cultural Center, or Culture Club as it is called, offers social, recreational and educational activities for adults with developmental and cognitive disabilities.

Though bowling came relatively easy to Simonet, the student volunteers jumped in to help the adults in wheelchairs and with other physical limitations, showing them how to use a special metal ramp to aim the bowling ball and get it rolling.

Culture Club meets every Wednesday and Friday evening and every other Saturday afternoon. Cooking, arts and crafts, bingo and movie and game nights have been among the weeknight offerings. Weekend dates have taken participants aboard the riverboat Jonathan Paddleford, to Minnesota Twins and St. Paul Saints games, and under the big top for a Circus Juventas show.

A program of the Hennepin and Ramsey County ARC before that program folded in 1996, Culture Club was picked up by the St. Paul Public Schools the following year. It operated in the Wellstone Learning Center in downtown St. Paul for many years. For the past three years, it has shared the old Riverside School with another school district program, Supportive Experiential Education (SEED) for adults with mental illness.

"Bowling is just part of our 'no hurry, no stress' approach to social activities and special events," said Culture Club director Faye Norton. Another popular event was the dogsled rides that brought 22 Siberian huskies to the Riverside campus last winter. Club participants were thrilled to circle the school behind the dogs and pet them.

"While they're having fun, we work in the

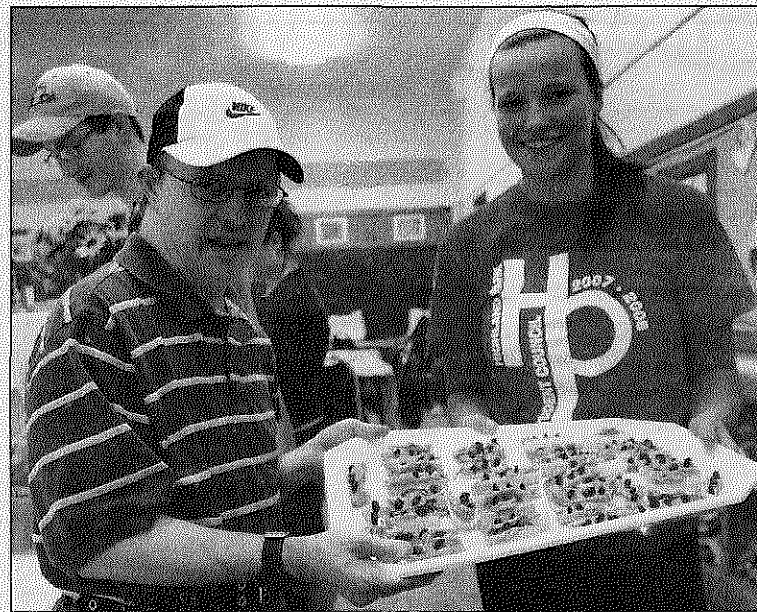
exercise so vital to the developmentally disabled," said Culture Club staffer Mark Ales, a longtime resident of Macalester-Groveland.

About half of Culture Club's budget comes through the St. Paul Public Schools' Community Education program, according to Lynn Gallandat, who directs that program. The other half is funded by donations and the fees paid by participants.

"We're fortunate to be in a school district that cares so much for lifelong learning for all of St. Paul," Gallandat said. "Culture Club is a unique social outlet that we're glad to have."

However, tight budgets and the economy have put the club's future in doubt, according to Norton. "As money gets tighter, I've had to look at alternative funding," she said. One of those funding sources is a new nonprofit organization, the Friends of Riverside School and Alumni Association, which disperses money to the Culture Club and several other organizations.

Six Highland Park Senior High School students have been volunteering at Culture Club activities this year as part of the school's service-oriented Friendship Club. Highland Park freshmen Elwyn Pfeiffer and Carolyn Hewes, both 14, said Culture Club has given them a chance to explore professions they may want



Eric Arson displays the edible Ants on a Log he cooked up with Highland Park High School volunteer Britney McCoy during a weeknight engagement with the Culture Club at Riverside School.

PHOTOS BY  
BRAD STAUFFER

to pursue as adults.

Kiara Caruso, 17, a junior at Highland Park, said it was an "incredible experience" to work with developmentally disabled adults and get to know them as friends. "I've come to respect people of all abilities," she said.

"It's gratifying to make strong bonds with people you wouldn't interact with otherwise," said Highland Park senior Brittney McCoy, 18. "It's important that we break the stigmas."

There were high-fives all around as Simonet and the others took a break in the fifth frame for pizza. Ales and fellow staffer Dawn Cardarelle arrange to have food served at many Culture Club events.

Longtime Culture Club participant Denise E. Cady, 55, held court during lunch, regaling fellow participants with personal anecdotes. "I love everything they do," Cady said of the

Culture Club.

Stephen Steffl, a caretaker who accompanied Cady and three other participants from a group home, said his charges have a great time at the club. "These people are dedicated and work hard to organize activities that it's difficult for us to find time for," he said.

According to Norton, Culture Club has enjoyed terrific support from the neighborhood. Local residents and business people and the Friends of Riverside School and Alumni Association have donated money, goods and in-kind services. Cash contributions from private individuals and a local bank totaled nearly \$2,000 in the 2009-10 fiscal year.

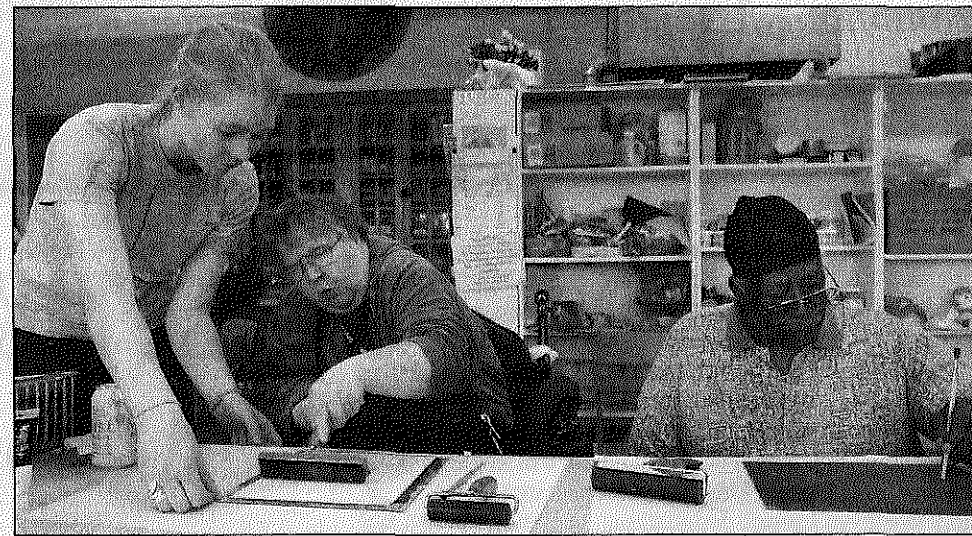
"There's a real small-town feel in the neighborhood and a curiosity about what we're doing," Norton said. "The guy down the block brought wood for a recent bonfire. Korte's Supermarket has donated pop, and Highland Nursery has helped with landscaping."

Riverside School alumnus Joe Card brought the pizzas for the bowling party. When he walked in, he also pulled a potato from his pocket. "It's for the booya," he said, referring to Culture Club's April 9 fundraiser.

"Riverside is perfect for us," Norton said of the former elementary school's campus. In addition to spacious grounds, it has classrooms, computer and science labs, a game room and a library.

Culture Club participants pay about \$7.00 per activity, or more if food is provided. Some come alone on the bus. Others arrive in vans from group homes.

"It's awesome," said Halle France, 20, a Highland Park resident who was taking part in her first club activity at the bowling party. "I get to meet people with special needs—just like me."



Culture Club participants Denise Cady and Walter Davis complete an art project with help from Highland Park High School volunteer Caroline Davidson.