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- Ana Jennings, Actress, the DisAbility Project

Ana Jennings, 42, describes herself as a "geek" in high school. The St. Louis transplant was an honor student growing up in New Orleans and says she never had time to try out for plays back then.

At 18, she suffered a spinal cord injury and now uses a wheelchair. But the injury did not affect her spirit.

Today, she champions the rights of the disabled and performs as an actress with the St. Louis-based DisAbility Project. The acting troupe operates under the auspices of That Uppity Theatre, which is funded in part through a project grant by the Arts and Education Council.

"Performing gives me a great sense of accomplishment," says Jennings, who is married, lives in Kirkwood and has a master's degree in education, with an emphasis in vocational rehabilitation.

"I enjoy hearing that immediate response from audience members. For me, it's cathartic. Sometimes they laugh, sometimes they cry, sometimes there are oohs and aahs," she continues.

"We're a pretty different group of actors. You just don't see a lot of people with disabilities performing on stage. But this opportunity to act and create art has given me the chance to show people that disabilities aren't all that scary.

We have feelings and thoughts and we interact, just like most of the rest of the world."


Founded 14 years ago by area residents Joan Lipkin and Frank Cohen, the DisAbility Project aims to raise awareness about disabilities, diminish bigotry and promote inclusion.

The troupe is comprised of about 20 disabled and non-disabled members, ranging in age from 18 to 70. The project has performed for approximately 85,000 people to date, presenting at schools, conferences, special events, festivals, religious and civic groups, and corporations.

"We are all about going out into the community, from boardrooms to car washes," says Lipkin. "We've performed virtually everywhere."

Jennings says that acting with the Disability Project has taken her to dozens of cities all over Missouri as well as many in Illinois and Kansas. "It's been a lifeline for me," she says. "What we do educates and entertains people, which is what, I believe, art should do.

"Sometimes I wish art was more treasured by people – that it wasn't something we take for granted. I love how it can really get people to think about something in a different way. It's confrontational, but not in a negative way. It can hit people in the face but more like with a pillow than a brick. It's one of the best tools around to combat ignorance and to enlighten people."



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