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The art of sharing

Grants enable two Saratoga County musicians to showcase traditions

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Indian musician and teacher, Vidya Subramanian, at her home in Clifton Park, N.Y., in April of 2009. (James Goolsby/Times Union)

Nancy Walker served two years on the panel that evaluates applicants for arts grants in Saratoga County. The second year, 2008, she lobbied hard for an Indian musician from Clifton Park.

Walker, a folksinger from **Greenfield Center**, believed that the musician, Vidya Subramanian, should be heard by Americans unfamiliar with her music.

"I thought Vidya's work was top-notch. And it is top-notch," Walker says. "It's throat singing. It's something we don't hear very often. In her world, in her country, this is an art. And we need to understand it."

Despite Walker's support, Subramanian's application was turned down. She applied again last year. And, after stepping down from the judges' panel, Walker applied, too.

"When I got the letter in the mail that I had received the grant, I was ecstatic, as you can imagine," Walker says. "And when I stopped in at the arts council to sign the paper work, I found out that Vidya was also a recipient. I was so happy I almost cried.

"She's carrying on a tradition that needs to be carried on. So this is really exciting for me that I get the grant alongside of her."

The American folkie and the Indian musician will receive their grants Monday at the **Arts Center** in Saratoga Springs along with 24 other recipients. Both will receive \$2,500, and both plan on using the money to tell stories -- Subramanian, the story of the Indian classical music known as Carnatic, and Walker, stories of the people of Greenfield Center, which is six miles northwest of Saratoga Springs.

They will be the only individuals to receive grants from the \$52,660 distributed by Saratoga Arts (formerly **Saratoga County Arts Council**). The rest will go to organizations, nonprofits and schools.

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The money comes from the **New York State Council on the Arts**. The state agency grants funding to regional arts organizations across the state, and the regional groups dispense it through their own formal grant processes. Since the early 1990s, Saratoga Arts has distributed more than \$650,000 in state-funded arts grants, says **Joel Reed**, executive director.

After being turned down in 2008, Subramanian says, "I can't say I was shocked to receive the grant, but I was very pleasantly surprised. I did a lot of work understanding the expectations of the selection panel, and I've been trying to reach out to a lot of people about this musical art form."

Subramanian was born in southern India and lived in Chennai, a vibrant, culturally active community on the eastern coast, until coming to the United States to pursue a master's degree at **Boston College**. Now, she teaches Carnatic music and performs at Indian-music concerts.

Her project in Saratoga County has three parts. For the first, Subramanian will create two musical compositions.

For the second, she will conduct six free training classes at the **Clifton Park-Halfmoon Public Library**; they'll be at 2 p.m. Saturdays (Jan. 16, 23 and 30, and Feb. 13, 20 and 27). She will explain how melody and rhythm work in Carnatic music, how it relates to religious life in India, and how improvisation is similar to what happens in jazz. She will also play compositions and feature great composers.

And for the third part, she will hold three lectures and performances that will involve her trainees, including children: 6 p.m. Feb. 12, [Malta Community Center](#); 2 p.m. Feb. 19, [Mechanicville Public Library](#), and 4 p.m. March 6, Historic Grooms Tavern in Rexford.

"My goal is to educate and engage local communities in the 3,000-year-old tradition of Carnatic vocal music," Subramanian says. "It's a completely different type of music from what people here are familiar with."

Walker, whose genre is familiar folk music, found her idea closer to home.

"About two years ago, a neighbor down the road here in Greenfield, a woman we knew, was moved from her home to a nursing home," Walker says. "She unfortunately caught a virus in the nursing home and died. And she was 102 years old when she was moved from here. She was this lovely little old lady, and I wrote a song about her."

The song "Did You [Know John](#)?" became so popular that listeners kept requesting it at concerts. Since moving to Saratoga County in 2002 with her musician husband, [Larry Clyman](#), Walker performs three or four times a month.

"We had made our living in music in Chicago," Walker says. "The idea was we were going to get out of the city and carve out a new place for us."

They came here because her husband's family is from Albany. Now, he plays in bands and teaches guitar at Saratoga Guitar. She works at [Skidmore College](#).

"I am not shaking the bushes when it comes to playing music," Walker says. "I'm pretty happy with where I am in life."

She's busy now, though, working on her project. She's planning to record a CD -- it will be her third -- of songs about the people of Greenfield Center. She's written a couple already, and, during a recent concert at the [Greenfield Historical Society](#), she asked the audience for stories or suggestions for songs. The town supervisor has offered the [Greenfield Grange Hall](#) for a recording session in May.

Walker calls her project "True Colors," and that's what she plans on calling the CD. It will, she says, provide a greater understanding of the individual and the community, just as Subramanian's project will provide a greater understanding of a people's music.

"My project is very different from [Nancy's](#)," Subramanian says. "And I think that's great. I think it really shows the kind of diversity and talent we have in Saratoga County."

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