

## Actor's passion an agent for change

By Carlee Jensen

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LINCOLN BLVD — The year was 1969. The role was "Villager" in Homestead High School's performance of "Tea House of the August Moon." The man was John Paizis, then a sophomore, who was appearing onstage for the first of what was destined to become many, many performances.

"I got so immersed in [acting], and it was so exciting and so fun," Paizis said, remembering the chagrin of his high school track and field teammates at his newfound passion. "I knew that this was what I wanted to do."

It was this knowledge that guided Paizis through years of work in the performing arts. Now, at 55, Paizis finds that his life has gone in a different direction than he ever could have anticipated as a child. As the founder and director of Performing Arts Studio West (PASW), he is using his love of the performing arts to enrich the lives of developmentally disabled individuals throughout the Los Angeles area through music, dance, theatre and film.

The San Francisco-born son of a special education teacher, Paizis grew up comfortable around the developmentally disabled. He began working with disabled individuals himself in the 1980s. As he tried to make ends meet while pursuing a musical career, Paizis landed a "day job" with the Brentwood Center for Educational Therapy.

"I identified that there was a real, real need for more supervision and creativity in the program," Paizis said. "In many social services systems, especially those working with adults, there's a tremendous lack of creativity."

Such was the case at the center, where Paizis was disturbed to find adults engaged in stringing beads, simple puzzles and other activities more suited to children than grown men.

"These are adults," Paizis remembers thinking when he arrived at the center. "They just want to be treated normally. They just want a real, sincere, adult relationship with whoever they're working with. They don't want to be treated like little kids."

It was a situation that Paizis strove to change. He worked to incorporate his love of the performing arts into his work at the center, and encouraged other staff members to do the same with their own passions. Paizis spent 17 successful years at the center, eventually becoming associate director.

When the Center for Educational Therapy closed down in the late 1990s, Paizis used the opportunity to launch PASW. The studio opened its doors in June of 1998, with five students and Paizis himself as the only instructor.

The studio has grown considerably in the years since its opening. Today, it serves more than 65 performers with various disabilities, and 10 instructors — all industry professionals — make up its staff. Staff and students alike have produced countless original works in the studio over the years, including plays, films and a Web series to be released in September.

"The biggest challenge is getting people to be comfortable with the idea that you don't have to worry about actors with disabilities when they're on set," Paizis said. "That's the stereotype ... a lot of people think that they can't do this."

"I love the creativity, I love the people," Paizis said. "It's got a small town feel, and it's more of a community than the broad community of Los Angeles."

Though he loves the "quintessential Southern California experience" that he gets in Santa Monica, upcoming changes in Paizis's life may soon lead him away again; this time to Hollywood, where his fiancée, Megan Slikas, lives.

This may not be the life that Paizis imagined for himself back in high school, but that's no problem for him.

"This is more fulfilling than anything I've ever done," Paizis said. "I get to be creative, and I get to write, I get to act, I get to create music ... That's what I think success is: being able to share my passion with other people."

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