

An Artful Summer

A Job Program Inspires Creativity and Teaches Responsibility



BY JENNIFER DUBIN

The young man looked about 16. He had attached a grocery cart to the back of his bike and was banging it against parked cars as he rode up and down an alley in East Baltimore one summer afternoon. As soon as she saw him, Randi Pupkin recalls thinking to herself, “That kid needs something to do.”

Pupkin came across the youth six years ago during one of her many trips to Rose Street Community Center, a grass-roots organization that runs a homeless shelter and provides children and teens with engaging activities in a part of the city where positive outlets are few. The center is in a row house sandwiched between other row houses, many with boarded up windows and sagging stoops and roofs, in a neighborhood known for high poverty and crime. When she spotted the youth on the bike, she figured the community center didn’t appeal to him, and he had chosen vandalism to escape boredom. She remembered that at his age she had worked as a summer camp counselor. As she watched him dent car after car, she realized he needed a job, and so his frustration became her inspiration.

Pupkin was visiting Rose Street as part of her work with Art with a Heart, a nonprofit she founded 10 years ago to provide art classes to low-income youth and adults, homeless people, the disabled, and battered women and their children. Thanks to that mischie-

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Students in Art with a Heart’s Summer Job Program sell their wares at Artscape, a summer arts festival in Baltimore. Youth 13 and older receive a daily stipend of \$10 to create marketable art.

vous youth on the bike, the organization now also runs an art-focused Summer Job Program for youth 13 and older.

Each summer, Art with a Heart hires about 40 young people to make marketable art—tables and chairs, jewelry, and lamps, among other pieces—which they then sell at Artscape, an annual summer arts festival in Baltimore. Professional artists or people with art backgrounds teach the classes, in which students are employed for four weeks creating and perfecting their wares. Par-

ticipants earn a stipend of \$10 a day and receive breakfast and lunch. Many are from low-income families, others are homeless, and some have dropped out of school. They find out about the program through community centers, like Rose Street, or their schools. The program does not require that students have art experience or any kind of artistic skill to land a job. They need only an interest in working hard, showing up on time, and learning something new.

Though teachers will cultivate talent when they see it, the purpose of the program is not to discover the next Pablo Picasso or Romare Bearden. Art with a Heart instead uses art as a vehicle to teach job skills to students, many of whom have never filled out a job application or looked an interviewer in the eye. The program also allows teens to express themselves through visual art, an opportunity they may not get during the school year. With the increasing focus on improving reading and math achievement,* many students nationwide—not just in Baltimore—no longer have the chance to draw, paint, or sculpt. The economic downturn has also made the arts even less of a priority. Budget cuts have forced districts to scrap art classes and many other extracurricular activities that keep students engaged in school. In Baltimore, Art with a Heart's Summer Job Program provides the enrichment—not to mention the paycheck—that most youth here desperately need.

“Consistency Is Coveted”

A Baltimore native, Randi Pupkin had practiced law for 14 years in her hometown when she realized she no longer enjoyed her work. She mostly argued with other lawyers in the contentious field of construction litigation. After one such argument, it hit her: this is not how she wanted her life to go.

In what free time she had, she enjoyed arts and crafts. When her children were born, she made murals in their rooms. When one of them had a bug-themed birthday party, she made sets of wings and antennae for the guests. “I felt that art was a very joyful thing to do,” Pupkin recalls. While her desire to help people prompted her to become a lawyer, she felt like she wasn't fulfilling

*The Center on Education Policy has documented the narrowing of the curriculum. See *Choices, Changes, and Challenges: Curriculum and Instruction in the NCLB Era* (available at www.cep-dc.org/index.cfm?fuseaction=document.showDocumentByID&nodelD=1&DocumentID=212) and *Instructional Time in Elementary Schools: A Closer Look at Changes for Specific Subjects* (available at www.cep-dc.org/index.cfm?fuseaction=document.showDocumentByID&nodelD=1&DocumentID=234).



The Summer Job Program takes place at three sites in Baltimore, including Paul's Place, a community outreach center. Above, students glue glass beads onto lamps. Left, teacher Monica Lopossay works with student Yasmine Campbell.

that ambition. Art, however, would allow her to share the pleasure of self-expression.

So she researched group homes, shelters, and community centers, and found the people she was going to work with. Pupkin would teach and provide supplies. The classes, she hoped, would foster the camaraderie that can develop among people who make art together. “If you're a senior sitting alone and idle, it's nice to have the structure of a weekly art class, the community that the class creates for you, and the caring teacher who comes and engages you in something that you didn't know how to do before,” she says. “The same applies for a student in third grade or tenth grade.” Pupkin began to discuss her idea with friends and foundations, all of whom encouraged her. She chose to call her service Art from the Heart until she discovered that a tattoo parlor had already taken the name. So she settled for Art with a Heart, and in 2000, she established her nonprofit.

That first year, she enlisted a friend to help her teach evening classes at two group homes for emotionally troubled adolescent boys, a shelter for battered women and children, and an Alzheimer's facility. Though the annual budget was just \$6,000 and Pupkin describes herself as naive about the challenges she faced, Art with a Heart thrived.

Today, it has a budget of \$416,500, most of which comes from grants, donations, programming fees, and an annual fundraiser.

Art with a Heart offers 1,400 art classes each year at more than 30 different sites in Baltimore, as well as a couple in nearby Prince George's County, Maryland. Pupkin now spends most of her time cultivating partnerships and raising funds. She also manages the organization's five administrative employees and 22 teachers and assistants, and acts as a sort of mother hen. She stocks the office with plenty of food and sees to it that everyone is well fed, including the students who sometimes work there. A born nurturer and hugger, Pupkin constantly touches arms and shoulders in conversation. Her manner is informal, with no hint of pretension. She tells students to call her Randi instead of ma'am.

But don't mistake informal for unstructured. What sets her organization's art classes apart "is that we're not a workshop," Pupkin says. "We are a consistent, ongoing program within many different sites. So, for example, every Thursday at 5:30, Michael knows that the Art with a Heart teacher is showing up at his group home. They're going to do something that's fun. They're going to learn something. They're going to sit around the table and talk about their day. This is consistency for a population that has never known consistency. When you're talking about 15-year-olds who are homeless or 14-year-olds who have never known parents and have been in four different foster homes, consistency is coveted."

The Summer Job Program especially tries to teach the value of sticking with something and seeing it through. This year, students began their jobs on June 21 and worked until July 16-18, the week-end of Artscape. Art with a Heart partnered with three different sites to provide space for the program: Paul's Place, an outreach center in southwest Baltimore, where 14 students worked; Dr. Rayner Browne Academy in northeast Baltimore, where 20 students worked; and an office space a block away from Art with a Heart's headquarters in Baltimore's Hampden neighborhood, where 11 students worked.

Each summer, the schedule stays the same: Work begins at 10 a.m., and students must show up on time. Work ends at 2 p.m., and students can't leave early. They take a half hour for lunch at noon, and at 12:30 p.m., they must pick up work where they left off. If they arrive late, they don't get paid for the day. If they miss two days in one week, they don't get paid for the week. And if they need to miss work for a personal reason, they must provide

a note from home. "It's very strict," Pupkin says, "and it's very structured."

Not Just a Summer Job

A visit to Paul's Place during the program's second week shows that many students thrive on that structure. After a light breakfast of cereal and juice, they quietly sit at tables covered with paint-splattered cloths and write in their journals. Before working on their art, they spend the beginning of each day reflecting on a topic posed by their teacher. Pupkin and her staff provide teachers with journal ideas as well as the specific pieces they want students at each site to create for Artscape.



Kqwan Williams, left, and Raven Cornish, above, paint glass beads for lamps they will sell at Artscape. The students sold \$3,000 worth of artwork at this summer's festival.

This morning's journal theme: "If I could give any gift..." Students at the other two job sites also engage in the same exercise. After 15 minutes, Monica Loposay, the teacher, asks who wants to share. One student says she would give the gift of love. Another says she would give the gift of imagination. A young man says he would give away a million one-dollar bills. Their responses seem especially poignant given the program's location.

Around noon each day, a long line of people waiting for a hot meal forms outside of Paul's Place, a red-brick building situated among blocks of dilapidated row houses, many with trash-covered yards. The facility is an outreach center that houses a soup kitchen and a clothing bank, and provides services such as addiction programs and GED classes as well as afterschool and summer enrichment activities. This is the fourth year that Paul's Place has partnered with Art with a Heart to offer the Summer Job Program.

The students work in their own room on the building's first floor. The space has a sink for washing paintbrushes, hooks to hang smocks, bathrooms, and a couple of couches. They leave the work space only to help themselves to the hot lunch next door.

This morning's task is to finish arranging and gluing beads they painted earlier in the week onto contemporary, rectangular lamps. While students decorate the same kind of lamp, they

choose their own colors and create their own designs so that the lamps hardly resemble each other.

Ty'aira Manning, 17, sings along with the pop music coming through the mini speakers hooked up to Lopossay's phone, as she glues orange, red, and yellow beads onto her lamp. Teachers in a photography program she attends elsewhere suggested she apply for this job. She's here to gain a deeper understanding of art. A senior at Baltimore Polytechnic Institute, Manning took art as an elective last year, so she knows a little about colors and tones and how to stroke paint on paper. "I enjoy the program a lot," she says of her job. "I'm learning more a sense of responsibility," and how to "improve my time management."

This summer, Manning has little free time. After she leaves Paul's Place, she works for a family with young children from 3:30 to 7:30 p.m. She spends the money she earns from both jobs on her cell phone bill and books from Barnes & Noble. She also gives some of it to her mother, who was laid off from a local bank. Manning also pays her younger brother to do chores around the house so that he has "something to occupy his mind."

Leeya Davis, 15, plans to save her money for school clothes and hair care products. The ninth-grader at Augusta Fells Savage Institute of Visual Arts has participated in art classes and homework help at Paul's Place since third grade. She has developed a rapport with Cintra Harbold, the director of programs for children and youth at Paul's Place, who suggested she apply for this job. "It's fun to express yourself with art," Davis says, as she glues green beads onto her lamp.

Yasmine Campbell, 17, decorates a lamp with three other students. She says she wishes her school, Baltimore Talent Development High School, offered art. "Maybe it would help everyone in our school work together" and "have patience for certain things." Certain things? Campbell grins sheepishly. She explains that her peers at school "are not very patient with teachers."

Lopossay, a former photojournalist with the *Baltimore Sun*, walks around the room. "Do you like how this is set up so far?" E'Mynie Smith asks. Smith is referring to the pinks and neutrals covering her lamp.

"Let me take a look," Lopossay says, as she leans over Smith's work. "You're doing a good job of making sure the spaces are tight." Lopossay has spent much of the week encouraging everyone to cover the entire lamp and leave no visible white space.

A senior at Reginald F. Lewis High School, Smith says her favorite project so far is the small glass mosaic (about the size of an index card) each student made the first week on the job. Smith actually made two: one says "LOVE" and the other depicts an eye with a teardrop. Both mosaics feature colorful shards of glass. "When we were breaking the glass up, there was emotion behind that," Smith says. The day she made both pieces, she was upset over a fight with a friend; breaking the glass and creating something beautiful out of it helped her work through her anger.

It's an emotion that some students struggle to control. Hardships in their personal lives sometimes make it difficult for them

Leeya Davis, left, and Ty'aira Manning, right, can't help smiling as they decorate their lamps.



to focus or to accept constructive criticism. The program tries to help students improve their attitudes by providing one-

on-one attention and feedback. On Fridays, teachers at each site meet with participants individually to review their work for the week and to pay them stipends. Students are rated poor, satisfactory, good, or excellent in six categories: quality of work, quantity of work, cooperation, attitude, dependability, and communication. Lopossay spends 10 to 15 minutes with each student. First, she asks how they think they did. Then she tells them what she's observed. During these evaluations, most students say they want to improve their art and their attitudes. At the end of each weekly meeting, she pays them for their work in \$5 and \$10 bills. "I make sure to tell them, 'I'm not giving you this money—you earned this money!'"

One afternoon, Lopossay must tell two students that Friday she will dock their stipends for one day because they had done almost no work. Instead, they had talked and distracted their peers. When they find out they're losing a day of pay, they become angry and argue. Both vow to quit. To diffuse the situation, she tells them she will not argue with them and reminds them they have the option of not returning to class. When they do show up the next day, Lopossay greets them cordially. "I'm glad to see you ladies came back," she tells them. "I look forward to seeing the work you'll produce today."

The day they return to class, they do not misbehave, possibly because they want to keep their jobs and possibly because two speakers captivate the room. Pupkin has contracted with Workforce Solutions Group of Montgomery County Inc., a nonprofit that provides employment and training services to people looking for jobs and those who already have them. Pupkin has asked trainers from the group, Denise Higgs and Sheridan Stanley, to visit Paul's Place twice, and Rayner Browne and the Hampden site four

times each, to conduct sessions on job skills. This morning, they engage students in activities focusing on body language, the power of words, and the importance of teamwork. Both speakers share personal stories about overcoming adversity. Stanley says he grew up in the same hardscrabble neighborhood where the class is being held. Higgs shares how she learned to manage her anger only after a court mandated that she get help.

The students seem to be most moved by an activity in which they stand in a circle and share one thing they would change about themselves. Many say they want to improve their attitudes and, specifically, control their anger. Keishawn Dargan, who rarely speaks, says she wants to overcome her shyness. A few minutes later, Kqwan Williams, a quiet, lanky boy, makes this frank admission: he would change growing up without a father. “Maybe I’d turn out better than what I am now,” he says, as the room grows quiet. “Most boys in Baltimore don’t grow up with a father.” His peers nod knowingly, and they applaud when he says, “If I become a father, I wouldn’t leave.”

With the desire to change their attitudes fresh in their minds, Higgs tells them that next week’s session will focus on dealing with anger.

That session comes too late for one student. Toward the end of the program, one young woman continually disrespects her teacher and peers, and erupts in fits of rage. After several attempts to diffuse and redirect her, Lopossay tells her not to return to the program. She makes this difficult decision to teach the student that her actions have consequences and to keep the rest of the class on track.

Create with Care

The 11 students at the Hampden site also wrestle with their emotions. Most, estranged from their families, live on Madison Street in a shelter that Rose Street Community Center runs. Last summer, they worked with other students at Dr. Rayner Browne Academy, but “the mix of this group did not feel successful to us,” Pupkin says. The majority of the youth at Rayner Browne attend Rayner Browne during the school year; the Rose Street youth did not get along with them. So this summer, Pupkin decided they should work at their own site a block from Art with a Heart’s headquarters in Hampden, a hip neighborhood in northwest Baltimore known for its independent shops and restaurants. A van picks them up from the shelter each morning, giving them a chance to get to know a more vibrant section of their city. Having them close to her office also allows Pupkin to keep an eye on them.

One morning, tensions run high. The teacher, Edward Williams, a local muralist, has repeatedly told the students not to use cell phones during work, and he sternly tells them the no-cell-

phone rule yet again. The students sit unsmiling, and some rest their heads on the table. But once they start working, the tension lifts. Students focus on selecting photos from *National Geographic* magazines to cut out and use to decorate serving trays. Sierra Foster, 25, says her tray’s theme is “above and below ground,” so she’s looking for pictures of fish and trees. The mother of two has lived at the Madison Street shelter for three months and took this job to avoid being bored this summer. “I didn’t think it could be this fun,” she says.

Foster shows a visitor around the workspace—a vacant one-room office that Art with a Heart has rented. She points to the coasters the students made out of gravel and cut glass beads that



Diamonte Johnson talks to an Artscape shopper about Art with a Heart. Besides running the Summer Job Program, the nonprofit provides art classes to low-income youth and adults, homeless people, the disabled, and battered women and their children.

are drying along the wall, and the stools they painted with animal themes. She beams with pride as she points to her stool with an elephant painted on the seat and tiny peanuts on the legs. Foster says the stool so far is her favorite; she had never painted something before.

Davon Ferguson, 19, decorates his tray with abstract shapes that he cuts from wallpaper samples. Like Foster, he lives at the Madison Street shelter and applied for this job to “have something to do.” At 16, he was kicked out of school for hitting a teacher and now dreams of joining the National Guard. He hopes the military can provide him structure and discipline to change his life.

As Ferguson decides where to place his next shape, Williams looks over his shoulder. He likes what he sees so far. “Now you’re being interesting,” he says. “That grabs my eye more.” For those students cutting pictures from magazines, Williams encourages them not to get sloppy. He demonstrates how to hold the scissors firmly and to cut straight lines. He also says not to rush. Be “someone who really cares about his work,” he tells them. Make a customer at Artscape think, “I’m going to buy this piece.”

Time to Sell

At Artscape, customers do indeed buy the students’ work. They flock to the Art with a Heart booth and browse the brightly colored clocks, stools, children’s tables and chairs, rings, lamps, place mats, mosaics, and magnets. Kristina Berdan, a teacher at the Stadium School, a middle school in Baltimore, spends \$45. She buys coasters decorated with blue glass, and a lamp covered with yellow, purple, and blue beads. She plans to give the lamp to a friend. The coasters will go to her in-laws. Berdan says she has shopped at the Art with a Heart booth for years. “I love that young people are working here.”

Two students from each site work two-hour shifts throughout the three-day festival. Others stick around to socialize with their friends even when they aren’t working. Wearing a black Art with a Heart apron, Yasmine Campbell works the 2–4 p.m. shift on this sweltering Saturday. She walks around with a price list and sales form tucked under a clipboard and waits on customers. “It’s awesome,” she says of working in the booth. “It’s good to see your artwork displayed for someone else to keep in their home.”

Tawanda Christian, 22, also sporting an Art with a Heart apron, eats lunch under a tree near the booth. Her shift doesn’t start until Sunday, but she’s here today because she wants to help. Yesterday, customers bought her purple and blue coasters, and a stool she painted with a giraffe on the seat. When they sold, Christian says, she was so happy. “I almost cried.”

While most of Art with a Heart’s works do sell, not everything in the booth finds a buyer. Pupkin stores what doesn’t sell, and then displays it at another festival held every November at the American Visionary Art Museum in Baltimore. And now she’s planning to open Art with a Heart’s first permanent store, which will sell work created by participants in all of Art with a Heart’s programs. Pupkin hopes to open its doors by November.

In the days following Artscape, the program coordinators of Paul’s Place, Rose Street, and Rayner Browne, along with Pupkin, discuss how to spend the \$3,000 profit. In the past, they have used it to take students on trips to New York City and Philadelphia. On these outings, they stay at hotels and eat in



Visitors to Art with a Heart’s booth browse the students’ work, including glass-beaded lamps and colorfully decorated watering cans.

restaurants with waiters—first-time experiences for many students. A month after Artscape, Pupkin and the coordinators tentatively decide to

spend the money on a team-building experience such as Outward Bound. Many students have asked to keep the money made from this year’s festival, but Pupkin is reluctant to give it to them. When she has in the past, the students have just bought airtime for their cell phones.

The end of Artscape did not necessarily signal the end of their artful summer. Those who worked at Rayner Browne could spend three more weeks working with an Art with a Heart teacher to create a mosaic mural for the school. Middle schoolers who worked at Paul’s Place could stay another week for a jewelry-making class with an Art with a Heart teacher.

The youth from Madison Street did not have those options. Pupkin wanted to devise a way for them to continue their employment, but hadn’t found anything for the whole group. The day after Artscape, more than half of them called, asking if she had any work they could do. Pupkin said yes. She needed them to organize picture frames, lampshades, and bins of string, fabric, and felt, among other things, in the office’s storage room. If they showed up on time and worked hard, she would pay them a stipend of \$10 each day. Having worried about how they would handle the boredom they faced for the rest of the summer, Pupkin was thrilled and relieved that they contacted her. For as long as she could, she and her staff would keep Davon, Sierra, Tawanda, and their peers engaged, safe, and fed. She hopped in her car and picked them up. □