

"Blue Star's ARTsmart is a No-Brainer"

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By B. Lou Guckian

Taking art out of the classroom leaves kids unprepared to communicate or cope with life.

Today's school system lacks art instruction. Legislative revenue caps have all but eliminated art from classrooms. Rising enrollments at shrinking numbers of larger, under-funded public schools compound the problem, where, according to the Pew Hispanic Center, more students are on federal subsidies and teacher-student ratios are unmanageable. Living in a public school-system monopoly, low-and middle-income families cannot afford or even choose private schools that do teach the arts.

It's easy to see where all this leads. Students in public schools aren't exposed to the writers, poets, painters and playwrights whose contributions have helped shape our culture and society. They're not learning how to artistically think, feel or create.

Enter ARTsmart.

ARTsmart, an art education program, was developed two years ago by Blue Star Contemporary Art Center to help fill the artistic gap in San Antonio—and it's taken off like a rocket. "Our programs have been near capacity since the start," says Roland Mazuca, Blue Star's assistant director and ARTsmart education program director.

Since 2006, ARTsmart's budget has nearly doubled each year. "The increase signifies the lack of art education and a drive for the funds we need to provide what our community lacks," says Hill. "It reflects how the government has discounted the importance of art in schools. But through community programs like ARTsmart, the gap gets filled."

ARTsmart brings artists and art teachers together as children, teenagers and adults of all ages make hands-on art in safe and nurturing environments. "San Antonio's artists may sometimes seem a 'best kept secret', but ask them and they're ready to join in and help," attests Stacey Hill, ARTsmart education committee chair. Artists receive a stipend to mentor; art teachers earn continuing education credits; students learn art—the whole community benefits.

"Interest in the program is spreading," Hill says. The project is largely aimed at the swell of students pouring into art-deficient public schools. Ninety-seven percent of ARTsmart's patrons comprise an at-risk population characterized by low-income levels and single-parent households in high-crime areas. "Positive energy, volunteers, and donations for scholarships and programming are the help we ask for," says Hill.

ARTsmart offerings take many shapes and forms. For example, exhibitions, lectures, gallery talks and workshops are held at the Blue Star, the Semmes Library, at weeklong summer camps

and retirement communities. Art educators learn how to present complex techniques such as architectural concepts to students. And ARTsmart's biggest event "Family Day," draws hundreds of families together to have fun making art.

Deborah Keller-Rihn—artist, art educator and freelance curator—participated in last year's Family Day and likes to watch children and senior citizens bond. "Watch anyone involved in creating art and you will see how happy art makes them feel," she says. Mazuca agrees. "ARTsmart demonstrates that anyone otherwise art-deprived who sees their work framed and displayed realizes they can accomplish things in life," he says.

ARTsmart also attracts accomplished artists who teach the business of art to both art pros and wannabes alike. Ayanna Sherri Denise Irek is an art student and art model who attended ARTsmart's Business of Art Symposium last year. "I learned what exhibitors expect from artists and what jobs I might want," says Irek. "It was nice to hear artists say they found success outside typical corporate settings and that artists young or old have career options."

As art education advocates, Hill and Mazuca have found their niche. Each has earned fine arts degrees and served terms on the Blue Star board. While Hill is a collector of fine art, Mazuca is a printmaker, sculptor and ceramic artist, and former education and gallery director of the Carver Community Cultural Center; he often escorts a train of wide-eyed school children through the main gallery.

Joined by a small but eager staff and a band of volunteers, the pair is passionate about art's contribution to society and is on a single-minded mission to carry that message as far and wide as possible. They have grass-roots marketing strategy with word-of-mouth advertising. Donations by major corporate sponsors, such as H-E-B and Target as well as from Blue Star board members and patrons, have and will continue to be the lifeblood of ARTsmart.

Executive Director Bill FitzGibbons views ARTsmart as integral to the Blue Star and society at-large. "Art education gives people of all ages the ability to problem-solve and an enhanced self confidence," he says.

The most vivid example of ARTsmart's value comes from its participants, including 70-year-old Judith Wagoner, a resident of Primrose Retirement Community. "I raised five children and worked for 25 years and had no time to do art," Wagoner says. "Now I can! I take every art class I can. It's calming, gives me self-worth and puts meaning back into my life."

Last year, Wagoner, fellow residents and children from ARTsmart's after-school Mosaics of Student Artists in Community (MOSAIC) program made terracotta tiles that now adorn pillars that uphold a large sculpture displayed at the Bihl Haus Arts gallery.

Hill and Mazuca expect the best for ARTsmart, for everyone's sake. "Our long-term plans are to develop programs as sequential learning experiences for our community of artists and friends," Mazuca says. "We want to make contemporary art an everyday part of people's lives by

introducing and demystifying it, particularly for our youth.”

Get Involved in ARTsmart

To take part, offer donations, volunteer or schedule a tour, contact:

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