

Home Is



Where the Art Is

Therapeutic Arts Programs for DC Children and Youth

by Lauren Blundin

Project Create, a winner of ICPH's 2016 Beyond Housing award, creates a home for the arts in Anacostia, a poverty-challenged area of Washington, DC. Its high-quality, therapeutic arts programming develops relationships, community, and resilience in DC's youth.

Project Create is on a mission: to create art, to create opportunity, and to create community. The nonprofit deploys about 30 professional artists each year to teach art to children and youth in partner sites throughout Washington, DC's Wards 7 and 8, and also maintains a studio in Ward 8, known as the Anacostia neighborhood of the District of Columbia. The area is challenged by poverty and crime. In fact, in this area it is not unheard of for classes in public schools to be interrupted by lockdowns due to nearby shootings.

On a recent Tuesday evening, however, the small but cozy Project Create studio hummed with the quiet activity and conversation of 12 excited children and youth. Melissa Muttiah, a teaching artist with Project Create, patiently reviewed the "studio rules for behavior" created by the students earlier in the year, reminding them that the rules ensure that the studio remains a safe space for everyone. Muttiah demonstrated the process of making an accordion-style book out of card stock, origami paper, ribbons, and glue sticks. The project is not difficult, but it does have a number of specific steps, and the children were eager and attentive despite the wide range of grades represented, from elementary through high school.

At the Project Create home studio pictured here, professional artists provide therapeutic arts programming to children and youth from Washington, DC's poorest neighborhoods.





Art projects created by the children and youth participating in Project Create's extensive programming are on display at the organization's home studio in the Anacostia neighborhood of Washington, DC.

The students were attending Project Create that evening through a partnership with FAN DC, a mentoring organization for children and youth in foster care. (FAN is an acronym for Fihankra Akoma Ntoaso, which means “safe house, linked hearts” in the West African language of Akan.) FAN mentors picked up the students at their individual homes or schools for after-school programming that includes an art class with Project Create. As the class progressed, Mutiah, along with several assistants, circulated around the room repeating instructions, giving more demonstrations of the folding techniques required, and offering quiet encouragement and praise. By the end of the evening’s class, students were smiling with pride at the blank books they had created and personalized. They would now take their books home to fill as they liked, perhaps using them as sketchbooks or journals.

This class is one example of the many classes Project Create offers. In fact, the amount of programming Project Create pro-

vides, in the number of locations it serves, is remarkably comprehensive. The week’s schedule includes 15 classes offered through program partners in 13 different locations that include family shelters, long-term and transitional housing for families and youth, and Section 8 housing developments. Children and youth living in these locations have the opportunity to take classes such as visual art, spoken word and street art, mixed media collage, photography, hip-hop dance, and fashion.

This jam-packed schedule does not even include classes held in the Project Create studio, which offers painting and collage, digital design, dance, drop-in art time, teen studio (a variety of art opportunities for ages 13 and up), and Capoeira Angola (a Brazilian martial art). More arts opportunities through Project Create include documentary film, songwriting, music production, and, in partnership with the Anacostia Playhouse, theater improvisation. Children and youth interested in studying fine art

have the opportunity to receive individual instruction. Project Create classes are free, offered after school and during the summer break, and designed for children and youth whose families are homeless and/or living in poverty. As impressive as it is, the breadth of Project Create’s arts programming and the depth of its commitment to youth development are only part of the reason that the Institute for Children,

“Broadly and anecdotally, what we see is that kids in shelters have very few opportunities to engage in artistic endeavors and self-exploration. Project Create can reach and engage those children, and keep them active in their community. ... We are only kids once.”

***—Maggie Riden,
DC Alliance of Youth Advocates***

Poverty, and Homelessness honored Project Create with the 2016 Beyond Housing award at the Beyond Housing conference in New York in January.

Maggie Riden, executive director of the DC Alliance of Youth Advocates (DCAYA), nominated Project Create for the Beyond Housing award. Riden has worked closely with Project Create in the past through DCAYA, which is a coalition of 130 youth development organizations dedicated to supporting area youth, making sure they have access to the opportunities they need to thrive, driving research in youth development, and finding funding to promote high-quality projects.

As students make art, they are also building relationships with caring adults and learning life skills like collaboration, teamwork, perseverance, and problem solving. Such skills help create resiliency in students, who often face many stressful challenges as a result of poverty and homelessness.

“Project Create is an incredible program,” says Riden. “Broadly and anecdotally, what we see is that kids in shelters have very few opportunities to engage in artistic endeavors and self-exploration. Project Create can reach and engage those children, and keep them active in their community. Project Create also helps to make a shelter a place where kids can be kids, physically and emotionally. ... It is such a unique time. We are only kids once.”

“We are lucky because DC is so rich in the arts, arts educators, and artists,” says Project Create Executive Director Christie Walser. “We draw from our local community to engage teachers in all disciplines, so we can offer a huge range of visual, performance, and digital media arts.”

The organization was created in 1994 by pastor and community activist John Wimberly who saw a need for positive, community-building activities focused on youth. At the same time, the public school system was cutting funding to arts programs. Using creative arts as a tool for youth development provided a way for Wimberly to support area youth while providing quality arts instruction. Wimberly started with one after-school arts program

for children attending Thaddeus Stevens Elementary School. The organization grew over time both in locations and in programming. In 2016, Walser expects Project Create will serve over 500 children and youth, ranging from ages 5 to 24, living primarily in DC Wards 7 and 8.

In addition to its classes, Project Create coordinates arts enrichment field trips (e.g., theater and museum visits), holds community art events for families several times during the year, and puts on exhibitions and performances for the community. A board-certified art therapist develops the programming which is delivered by experienced, trained artists who are supported by teacher assistants or student assistants. Most important, as students make art, they are also building relationships with caring adults and learning life skills like collaboration, teamwork, perseverance, and problem solving. Such skills help create resiliency in students who often face many stressful challenges as a result of poverty and homelessness. The quality of resiliency is an important predictor of future positive life outcomes for children and youth, which is why many youth development organizations such as Project Create strive to develop it in the populations they serve.

According to Project Create, 80 percent of its programming serves children and youth experiencing homelessness, and 20 percent takes place in partnership with out-of-school-time programs in high poverty neighborhoods. Most classes take place “East of the Anacostia,” meaning the neighborhoods of

Project Create uses art classes like this to build self-awareness in their students, creating well-rounded individuals and nurturing them from the inside out.





Project Create classes like the one shown in this photo aid in the development of life skills such as collaboration, teamwork, and problem solving.

Wards 7 and 8 located east of the Anacostia River. The poverty rates there are extremely high—40 percent and 50 percent, respectively, of households are living below the poverty line. (The federal poverty line is defined as a household income of \$24,000 per year for a family of four.)

Through partnerships with housing and social service organizations like Community of Hope and Sasha Bruce Youthwork, Project Create delivers arts classes on-site in transitional, emergency, and long-term affordable housing locations. The classes are a welcome, fun, and safe place for students who are dealing with serious challenges in their lives. The program partners are grateful for the service Project Create provides children in the community. “The teachers have great relationships with the kids, and the kids look forward to it,” says Carla Turnage, program director at DC’s Community of Hope. “It gives them an

opportunity to do something fun, and it also encourages them to try new things outside of class.”

Project Create’s studio in Anacostia opened in 2015 and helps program staff maintain a relationship with students they originally encountered in temporary housing situations. Many students take the local bus line and/or the DC Metro (the local train) to visit the studio, and some students have been involved with Project Create for as many as ten years.

“Our families are transitional,” says Walser. “They move around, and in and out of homelessness. Sometimes they move from transitional housing to long-term housing to supportive housing. There is a lot of flux, and we were finding that we were establishing relationships with students, but if the family moved or the partnership changed, then we were losing the relationship with those kids. With our new home studio, those kids are coming to us. Basically no matter where they are, if there is a relationship, they can find us. We have a lot of relationships start through housing providers, and then families can continue with us at the studio, so that has been a great outcome. We host classes six days a week, so at any one time, we have around 24 to 25 classes happening throughout the city.”

Eric, age 17, is one such student in the DC public school system. While attending class at Project Create, Eric had to move from his family home into a group home for boys because of a family conflict. After developing close ties with Project Create staff, he maintained his relationship with them even after moving. Most days after school he visits Project Create. Sometimes he participates in programming (such as a Teen Night field trip), other times he works as a student assistant in one of the art classes for younger children, and sometimes he just goes by the studio to say hello and touch base with Christie Walser, with whom he has become close. Eric enjoys the art classes—his personal highlights include using spray paint in a street art class, learning to sew by hand and with a machine, and using a 3-D printer. Every Monday evening he attends the teen open studio. “We can

“Art therapy really focuses on the process and making sure that feelings and emotions and things can be expressed using art materials. ... Art therapy works really well with folks experiencing trauma.”

***—Lindsey Vance,
art therapist and senior program
manager at Project Create***

come in and work on an art project,” he says, describing the teen studio, “or just chill it.”

Eric has developed friendships with other students at the studio and a close mentoring relationship with Walser. When Eric recently visited the studio, Walser asked him how he was feeling, encouraged him to snag a snack from the studio kitchen when he mentioned being hungry, and reminded him that he needs to fill out his application for DC’s Summer Youth Employment Program, which should allow him to continue working at Project Create and be paid through the city. Sometimes Eric even calls Walser “Ma.”

***“You get to express yourself.
And no one judges you.”***

***—Naimka,
Project Create student***

“I knew she was a person I could talk to,” says Eric about Walser, who has been a stable presence among recent major changes in Eric’s life. “I could trust her. She is always there for me.” When talking about the many challenges Project Create students like Eric face, Walser says, “I admire our kids. They are so strong, so resilient, and so creative.”

Part of Project Create’s uniqueness is its emphasis on arts instruction that is also therapeutic. But what exactly is therapeutic art, or art therapy, as it is also known? Lindsey Vance, art therapist and senior program manager at Project Create, readily explains the concept. “Rather than having just an art class, where you are learning about how to create a certain product,” says Vance, “art therapy really focuses on the process and making sure that feelings and emotions and things can be expressed using art materials. My focus is less on what the children and students come here to create, and more on the process and what they are going through. Art therapy works really well with folks experiencing trauma.”

Seventeen-year-old Eric embraces Executive Director Christie Walser, who has remained a constant in his life. He visits Project Create most days to participate in programming as well as to work as a student assistant in one of the classes.

“It may just look like a regular art class on the surface,” continues Vance, meaning that Project Create art teachers discuss techniques and students follow steps just as in any other class. “We have teaching artists who give specific directives for assignments.” She discusses a painting and collage class. “But we are really focusing on creating meaningful ways to create images and collages about the self. We are trying to cultivate self-awareness in our students so that we can create a well-rounded individual, and kind of nurture and grow our students from the inside out. Whether it is theater, or dance and movement, we are coming at art from a perspective where it is not about just learning skills, it is also learning about yourself and how you can apply these skills.”

Clearly, Project Create is making great headway in its mission to create art, to create opportunity, and to create community. Naimka, a ten-year-old student, recently visited the drop-in art session at the home studio. She greeted staff cheerfully, turned on some music, and settled in to practice digital art. She created colorful, abstract designs on a computer while chatting comfortably with Walser and the art teachers and assistants. Asked why she enjoys attending Project Create, Naimka says simply, “You get to express yourself. And no one judges you.” ■

