



ART SPHERE



Changing the world through art

by DOMINIQUE VERRECCHIO

Art Sphere Inc. (ASI) is a Philadelphia-based non-profit established to teach art to inner-city low-income youth. Over these past 20 years, ASI has provided free 10-week art classes that reinforce core curriculum such as literacy, health and environmental awareness. Their programs have inspired youth to excel in school, pursue college, careers in art and explore their creative potential. While declining budgets and funding causes an ab-

sence for art programs in schools and recreation centers, more and more communities are becoming stretched for creative public services. ASI aims to fill the artistic void by fostering visual arts and developing broader skills to help students thrive in all subjects.

Kristin Groenveld, Executive Director of ASI, explains that students come to ASI now with fewer skills than ever. "There is never quite enough time to teach all the projects we want to share, answer all the questions about the world that kids ask, listen to all their ideas and give them all the encouragement that they need to flourish." For this reason, ASI actively recruits volunteers to assist art teachers and help guide youth.

Groenveld says, "For a child, every day is full of new opportunities for learning about themselves and the world. Our teachers know that when we work with students, we are helping

youth build important skills, motivation and self-confidence to become lifelong learners. We make great memories and success stories that are very rewarding and keep us, as adults, aware of how wonderful life is. Young people are so excited to learn, try new art forms and make connections. They are our next generation of problem solvers, innovators and healers!"

ASI gives students profound art experiences with professional grade art materials such as ceramics and glazing, architecture using perspective drawing and drafting tools, clay animation with iPads, literacy and bookmaking, mural painting and printmaking. Through their artwork, youth share their struggles and dreams with peers and mentors who support their growth.

"Our participants provide us with constant motivation and inspiration," Groenveld says. "The mother of a preschool student wrote on our survey about her son who made a sculpture

from their recycling after our class. A high school alumnus wrote that they never felt prouder of graduating as when they were able to say that they painted mascot murals in their school halls. A grandmother said her grandson would be the first to go to college in her family because our programs inspired him. The brother and sister who were learning English and identifying every letter that they could find in the classroom after making an alphabet book. The partner site teacher who was ecstatic that a father would bring in sticks for all the children and wanted to teach them to fish when he saw that they made fish art projects. Being a part of a community that values compassion and care gives us hope for the future."

ASI's survival primarily depends on monetary and service contributions from individuals and corporations. They look for support and volunteers so they can share programming in South Philadelphia and with immigrants and youth struggling to learn English.

A goal for the future is to sell more items in the Bok Building Cafe, including pillows inspired by a student's need for more sleep. ASI staff was concerned after reading a Stanford Medicine article citing sleep deprivation in youth as one of the leading

causes of depression, obesity, emotional problems, suicide and academic issues. They hope to raise awareness of the impact of this epidemic while selling their student and volunteer art. They would also like to expand their programming in South Philadelphia. ASI runs a series of summer art programs for youth at schools and recreation centers from July-August. They will be hosting free art programs for all ages on August 5th and September 2nd at the Bok Bar Family Sundays.

"We raise money for Art Boxes filled with free art materials for youth to make art at school and home. High school students have also told us they use these boxes with siblings and babysitting. Parents have told us that making art together has brought their families closer. Students have brought their sketchbooks to show us years later as documents to their experiences, thoughts and feelings."

ASI has a rich, diverse network of partners that value making art accessible. "Art is a vehicle for change," says Groenveld. "Philadelphia has a wealth of creativity and resilience that fuels our students with the drive to want to make the world a better place. ASI provides a map to go places!"

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