



Children find inspiration at Arts Corps' after-school classes

Creativity to their art's content



ALAN BERNER / THE SEATTLE TIMES

Catherine Lucas-Dorsey, right, a first-grader at St. Therese School in Seattle, delights in the snowman she made from a sheet of butcher paper in a project led by Arts Corps teacher Lauren Atkinson, center, in green sweater. Four schools, including St. Therese, contract with Arts Corps for school-day arts programs.

BY PAUL DE BARROS
Seattle Times staff reporter

Standing in front of a white dry-erase board covered with algebra equations, Darien Shyne holds up a pen-and-ink drawing of a chubby cartoon character.

"This is Snowy," he says quietly, explaining that his creation's enemies are the Flames, who melted Snowy's frosty planet. "He's 15. ... He can form snowballs and icicles just by blowing out. ... He eats snow and ice. His mission is to become a dictator and freeze all planets — for revenge."

Darien, 11, is taking a cartooning class at St. Therese, a Catholic school

in Seattle's Madrona neighborhood.

Come Monday, when a new term starts, more than 500 children in King County — kindergarten through 12th grade — will be enrolled in 53 such arts classes offered by a non-profit organization called Arts Corps. The after-school classes — which include dance, poetry, sculpture, animation and a variety of other genres — are the brainchild of Lisa Fitzhugh, who once worked as an environmental aide to former Seattle Mayor Paul Schell.

At a time when most schools have budget problems, and can't or won't teach art, Fitzhugh figured why not

bring art to the kids — and do it after school?

Thanks in large part to her passion, Arts Corps has grown from an idealistic vision into a \$750,000 organization with nine part-time employees. In 2003, the organization was honored with a Mayor's Arts Award for "Outstanding Contribution to Arts Education."

Although some arts professionals worry that Arts Corps emphasizes feel-good "self-esteem" over teaching skills, and may even let schools off the hook for teaching arts altogether, others say Arts Corps has demon-

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About Arts Corps

Staff: nine part-time staffers, 30 artists, 150 volunteers.

Founded: by Lisa Fitzhugh in 2000.

Original budget: \$167,000.

Current budget: \$750,000.

Serves: 26 sites (including schools and teen and community learning centers).

Web site: www.artscorps.org

Source: Lisa Fitzhugh

PROGRAM INSPIRES
KIDS TO BE CREATIVE

Arts Corps offers
after-school classes

strated its effectiveness through sophisticated evaluation tools.

Filling a need

"Arts Corps is the most powerful program that I have come in touch with," says Sarah Davis, who invited Fitzhugh to give the keynote speech at an annual conference of arts educators in Tennessee this year. "There is nothing like it in the country. It has the power to change lives. And I think it is doing that."

Arts Corps offers classes throughout King County, from Tukwila's Cascade View Elementary School to the Seattle Public Library. Four schools, including St. Therese, contract with Arts Corps for school-day arts programs. Instructors are artists in their own right. The one- to two-hour classes are usually held two days a week.

Fitzhugh sees Arts Corps as filling a need. In the Seattle Public Schools, for example, just 23 of 69 elementary schools have visual-arts programs of any kind and only 37 have a general music teacher. (Five have theater; four have dance.) Middle schools and high schools each have one or two arts programs, but they are spread over larger student populations.

And arts programs tend to get the shortest shrift in low-income areas: Chief Sealth High School in West Seattle has one music teacher for 932 kids.

"Do we get to do art?"

Charlotte Beall, a former employee of the Seattle Children's Museum who teaches an Arts Corps sculpture class and helps with assessment and evaluation, said, "I get to see kids excited by art [at a time] when our school system and our basic living environment isn't promoting that. Last Monday was my first day at kindergarten. The kids were jumping up and down. 'Do we get to do art?'"

As arts education in the classroom has eroded, after-school enrichment programs have grown. Two years ago in Seattle, the Mayor's Office of Arts and Cultural Affairs, an Arts Corps sponsor, shifted its Arts in Education money to "out-of-school arts training." The federal government also has invested heavily in after-school Community Learning



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Lisa Fitzhugh, seen with dogs Molly, left, and Boogs, founded Arts Corps in 2000 after writing a business plan and getting money — \$25,000 from Pearl Jam and a \$25,000 match from The Ackerley Group.

Centers (CLCs). Seattle schools get funding for 17 CLC sites. Five are Arts Corps partners.

"There's a captive audience of young people," Fitzhugh says. "Some of them are just hanging out, and this is the program that gets them inspired."

"The expressions on the kids' faces when I see them perform, [is] of absolute joy at being seen," she says. "Children don't get enough of that. I get emotional every time I see it."

"She's on a mission"

Fitzhugh, the daughter of social-programs photographer Susie Fitzhugh, grew up in Baltimore, graduated in 1989 in political science from Duke University and interned for U.S. Rep. Ben Cardin of Maryland. She moved to Seattle in 1991, working first as an environmental consultant, then as environmental aide for Schell from 1998-2000.

At age 31, and still in the mayor's office, Fitzhugh learned that she had breast cancer.

She rethought her life, she says, and decided "politics was too far removed from real people. I did a whole lot of research around after-school programming and the arts."

In the spring of 2000 she wrote a business plan and got some seed money — \$25,000 from Pearl Jam and a \$25,000 match from The Ackerley Group. She sold her car, an old Volvo, for \$5,000. Arts Corps started with six teaching sites; within three years, it was four times that size. "I didn't even know when I started how much the need was," she says.

Today there is a waiting list for Arts Corps programs.

"She's on a mission," Schell says. "When she left, and told me what she was going to do, I said, terrific, but I didn't give her much chance of success. But it's exactly what needed to be done. Anyone who has studied which kinds of jobs this area is going to excel in — high-tech, creative jobs — knows that the arts play a very important role of developing that side of people. It should be treated as a basic skill."

"There's no quit in her. She can charm and she can dazzle at the same time. She is certainly one of the next generation who can be a leader in our community."

Fitzhugh believes that making art makes kids feel good about themselves, and that feeling good about themselves will set the stage for academic excellence. There's evidence that supports her view.

"Champions of Change," a report compiled by the Arts Education Partnership, a national coalition, says "students with high levels of arts participation outperform 'arts-poor' students by virtually every measure." For kids from low-income backgrounds, the report adds, arts "make an even more significant difference."

Arts Corps conducts elaborate pre- and post-class surveys of its students and teachers which support that view.

Trivializing the arts?

But for some arts supporters, the extracurricular Arts Corps approach runs the risk of trivializing the arts.

"After school' encourages the idea of an activity, not a curriculum," says Seattle Pacific University music education professor

Ramona Holmes. "It doesn't mean we don't love having that stuff. Science club after school is great. But that doesn't mean we don't want science."

This philosophical conflict between teaching concrete arts skills and nurturing the creative process came to a head in 2003 when the city's cultural office hired Arts Corps to put on a theatrical revue at Rainier Beach High School. Arts Corps was not invited back.

The high school wanted a finished product, said Seattle Arts Liaison Michelle Blackmon. Although Arts Corps concluded that the students "worked well together on a script," there was no production and the organization realized it couldn't live up to the expectations, Blackmon said.

"We're more about process — the experience — than the result," Fitzhugh says.

Still, many Arts Corps teachers do focus on skills and do expect results.

At St. Therese, by the end of the term, the students in Maikoiyo Alley-Barnes' Arts Corps cartooning class will have developed an animated character, written a "back story" to explain its motives, created a sculpture of it, and drawn an American-style strip or one in the Japanese manga style, featuring their character as the hero.

But perhaps a former Arts Corps student's testimonial — taped to the refrigerator in the Arts Corps office — says it best.

"After I got a camera," wrote Astra Era after taking a digital photography class, "I began to see light everywhere."