Arts Corps @ 10 Years

A LOCAL MODEL LEADING NATIONAL CHANGE

ANNUAL REPORT 2008-2009
Dear Everybody:

Thank you. Your commitment to powerful learning for all young people is going to change the world.

Nearly 10 years ago, a small group of passionate teaching artists gathered in the living room of an equally passionate and tenacious woman, Lisa Fitzhugh. They brought years of experience in youth development and arts learning, as well as a desire to reach a broader community. Together, they envisioned an organization that would bring together these artists with schools and after-school centers so that their collective efforts could create the conditions for all children to have the freedom to imagine and the courage to be their full selves.

Arts Corps was born, and that vision has remained the guiding force in all of our achievements. And in our 10th year, they are many: despite harsh economic conditions that have impacted schools, families, businesses and community organizations alike this past year, we served nearly 2,500 students throughout King County with arts learning opportunities that increase student practices of creative habits including imagination, critical thinking, persistence and courage.

Over these 10 years, we have transformed the lives of artists who have deepened their own creative practice through teaching. We have transformed institutions, filling classrooms with better learners; after-school programs with excited youth deeply engaged in fun, project based learning; low-income housing sites with a deeper sense of community. And we have fostered the innate creativity in thousands of young people, helping them find and express their individual voices and building a foundation for lifelong learning. Some of our students have gone on to become accomplished artists. For others, their experience with Arts Corps has become foundational in their way of thinking and being in the world.

Thousands of students have passed through Arts Corps’ doors in the past decade. These young people and their numerous achievements are the true testament to the power of this work. In this annual report, three of them -- two Arts Corps alumni and one current student -- reflect on the impact of their experience.

With your investment, we have taken and grown this powerful vision and reached nearly 15,000 Seattle area youth, enabling them to build their confidence through their own voice and creativity. And thanks to your support, we are now bringing this model to another arena -- a national one.

This past year, Arts Corps became a leader in a new national effort to create a federally funded artist service corps, as called for by President Obama and the Edward M. Kennedy Serve America Act. Music National Service, our collaborator, created a program called MusicianCorps as a prototype for this national Artist Corps." In fall 2009, MusicianCorps pilot programs were launched in four cities – Seattle, Chicago, New Orleans and San Francisco. Arts Corps is running the Seattle pilot, and we’ve hired four experienced and gifted teaching musicians to work in low-income schools and community sites to expand access to music education while fostering civic engagement. It is exciting to see arts learning begin to get some traction on a national scale, and to be able to share what we’ve learned with like-minded people across the country.

As we look back on a decade of leadership in arts education, it’s inspiring and humbling to think of all the people who have contributed to Arts Corps’ success. In the next decade, we will build on the strength and proven results of our program, maintaining our deep presence in Seattle communities while providing a model for the growing national movement to bring arts learning back into the lives of every child.

All because of a group of passionate people decided to change the world.

Thank you for joining us in this life-changing work,

Elizabeth Whitford
Executive Director

Vivian Phillips
Board President

See our Corps members – teaching artists, program partners, board, staff and more – at WWW.ARTSCORPS.ORG/ROSTER

Check out our new evaluation report at WWW.ARTSCORPS.ORG/EVALUATION

Creative Habits
Program partners, teaching artists and students all cite an increase in students’ practices of key creative habits: courage & risk taking, imagining possibilities, and persistence & discipline.
Lauren Russell’s story with Arts Corps begins

with her, a white girl from a suburban family, walking apprehensively into an Arts Corps class and being awed by the talent of her fellow students; it continues with her on the other side of the country working to break down barriers for students of color at Yale University. For her, spoken word poetry has become a medium not only for her own self-expression but also for forging links across different cultural and socioeconomic backgrounds.

Lauren credits the class she took with Arts Corps teaching artists Aaron Straight and Ezekiel Rothman with the transformation. She recalls the initial awkwardness as students – white, black, homeless, suburban, urban – tried to figure out how to communicate. It fell away quickly, however, as students shared their verbal talents and rhymes began to flow. Her teaching artists facilitated this easy interaction and, as she puts it, encouraged each student to “probe into one’s innermost ideas, conceptions and pre-conceived notions about themselves, others and society and challenge them to examine, explore and re-think those ideas.” When she left the Seattle area to study at Yale, she brought this drive to question superficial differences to bear as a member of the African American Cultural Center. She also became president of the university’s spoken word group, WORD, and poetry remains her touchstone. “Spoken word,” says Lauren, “gave me my voice.”

According to teaching artist Lucien Pellegrin,

“I didn’t choose teaching – it chose me.” For him, teaching is not a process of imparting knowledge but of “reminding the students of their innate potential” to create and learn.

Lucien experienced this approach firsthand as one of the first students to take an Arts Corps class at the program’s inception in 2000. He took visual arts classes with Lauren Atkinson and, later, video production with Brian Quist at Garfield Teen Life Center. He credits both teaching artists with “creating an experimental space that allowed me to have more confidence with my own creative process.” Now a talented photographer and poet in his own right, Lucien seeks to portray an organic vision of the life of the city while deconstructing the “contrived stereotypes of race and gender” that are so prevalent in mass media. He has brought his artistic talents and his critical eye to Arts Corps students, first as a classroom assistant and more recently as a teaching artist, bringing his passion and talents full circle.

Sayimbi “Sammy” Tekle had never really thought much about dance of any sort before witnessing an Arts Corps break-dancing class as a 7th grader at Denny Middle School. Fascinated, he began to talk to teaching artist Jerome Aparis, who invited him to join the class. Sammy was hooked immediately and has never looked back. Now a senior in high school, he has been studying break dancing with Jerome for six years, first at Denny and later at Youngstown Cultural Arts Center.

For Sammy, break dancing is about more than performing complex movements; he relishes the combination of teamwork and leadership necessary to pull off a brilliant routine. “Break dancing is not a solo thing, it’s about who you’re going to do it with and how you’re going to get there,” he says. This delight in collaboration led him and fellow students to form a break-dancing crew called the Vicious Puppies, which now performs at events all over Seattle.

It helps that Sammy has had a strong example in Jerome, who, as he puts it, “is the best teacher I’ve ever had.” As he moves through his last year in high school, he’s looking forward not just to continuing to dance, but to following Jerome’s example, “teaching other people as Jerome taught me.”
I am simple but powerful and energized to fly through the world.

If I were a piece of art, I would be a picture drawing of a dragon because I'm filled with a fire of love.

When people look at me, they think I'm really creative, but they don't know how valuable I am.

I'm as important as silver, as special as a dark blue racing car with sparkles.

They may never know how good I am, but I do, just myself.