

Lisa Fitz- hugh

* The Art of Survival

She beat cancer and
now she brings art to
low-income children.
In her new battle,
it's the kids who win

BY WELLING SAVO

PHOTOGRAPHS BY SUSIE FITZHUGH



Lisa Fitzhugh and son Jack check out the new Arts Corps space at the Youngstown Cultural Arts Center

One of Lisa Fitzhugh's fantasies takes place along a stretch of highway in the American South. ¶ "I would run around the country, and all those billboards in the Bible Belt that say, 'God is your savior,' 'Follow God' or 'Christ' or whatever—I would cross out God and Christ every time and I would just put 'YOU,'" Fitzhugh says with an intense gaze. "You're it, heaven's right here and it's in you." ¶ She shares this fantasy from her South Seattle office, where she is sitting on a crimson sofa, poised on the edge of her seat. On the exposed brick walls behind her, paintings by local artists hang alongside murals by students. Photos of her partner, John, and their 4-year-old son, Jack, dot her desk between stacks of paper. For the past two years, this has been the nucleus of Arts Corps, the nonprofit arts education organization that Fitzhugh, 38, founded in 2000. ¶ "I would never really do it, of course," she says of her billboard-defacing fantasy. Still, it's entertaining to imagine Fitzhugh's lithe, 5-foot-4-inch frame scrambling up scaffolding with paintbrush in hand to embellish a religious billboard.

In the gospel according to Fitzhugh, which she pronounces with evangelical conviction, personal creativity is the most powerful force in the universe, and art is essential for connecting to one's spiritual center. That's why Fitzhugh would replace "God" with "You," in billboards across the south, and why part of Arts Corps' mission is to nurture individual power by providing low-income youth with access to art making. Its lofty vision is to create a more equitable society that celebrates the transformative power of art.

Through its classes and programs, Arts Corps serves thousands of young people in grades K-12 in Seattle and King County. It works with dozens of community organizations and has obtained funding from prestigious grant makers such as the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, the National Endowment for the Arts and the Paul G. Allen Family Foundation. Last fall, Fitzhugh was one of six women to receive a *Redbook* magazine Mothers & Shakers award.

Next month, Arts Corps will move its headquarters to Youngstown Cultural Arts Center (formerly the Cooper School) in the Delridge neighborhood of West Seattle, where it will also host its own classes.

Despite its grand scope and vision, Arts Corps was the result of Fitzhugh's deeply personal journey, encompassing a brush with death, a reckoning and a revelation. If Fitzhugh hadn't been diagnosed with breast cancer seven years ago—at 31—Arts Corps may never have existed at all.

A self-described "policy geek," Fitzhugh majored in political science at Duke University and spent two college summers working for Congressman Ben Cardin of Maryland. After graduation, she joined an economic consulting firm in Washington, D.C. Before her 30th birthday, she had garnered broad experience in policy and political work and accepted a prestigious job in Seattle as former Mayor Paul Schell's environmental policy liaison.

"I got jobs right out of school that were going to keep me in a career path that was stable and assured," says Fitzhugh. "I grew up with a mom who was an artist—a struggling artist. So all my life I've thought, 'I will never live that way.'"

Fitzhugh grew up in Baltimore, where her single mom worked long hours as a photographer to make ends meet. By age 11, Fitzhugh was working Sundays at an ice cream parlor and deli, to earn money for groceries.

She rebelled by avoiding the arts completely as a child and later pursuing a career path that was vastly different from her mother's. "I really had this thing of, 'OK, I'm using my left brain completely, because it's going to keep things in control.'"

But being diagnosed with Stage II breast cancer in 1999 sent Fitzhugh's ordered, left

brain-dominated world into a tailspin.

"It was like falling off a cliff, because there were so many unknowns," she says. "And it really made me reassess—'Who am I? Why am I doing any of this? What really matters?'"

Fitzhugh's reckoning brought with it a newfound clarity. "I had this sort of intense realization about how everyone walks around with all these layers of projections that other people have put on them," she says. "I was finding myself again, re-envisioning myself as the person I really am."

Disillusioned with the political process, which seemed increasingly removed from reality, Fitzhugh felt a calling to arts and education that she can only describe as inexplicable. She had never worked with kids and had spent most of her life avoiding "right brain" pursuits like the arts. Yet this notion rose persistently to the surface while she underwent chemotherapy and radiation treatment.

"I can't say for sure why I wanted to go in that direction—at the time it was so different from what I had ever known," says Fitzhugh. "I gave a lot of the credit to my mom in the beginning. And I said, for some reason, 'I'm going back to my roots.'"

Fitzhugh resolved to create a nonprofit. Her interest in social justice had driven her pursuit of politics, and now it would fuel her vision: to connect professional artists to children living in low-income, ethnically diverse communities. She would forge partnerships with community centers and schools to bring free after-school art classes to children in their own neighborhoods. Children would learn Brazilian drumming, music production and break dancing alongside more traditional art forms like poetry, painting and sculpture.

"Decent arts programming, in or out of school, was a huge unmet need," Fitzhugh says.

On the heels of this revelation, five months after her last cancer treatment Fitzhugh left the mayor's office. She sold her 1985 Volvo for \$5,000 to finance four months of market analysis on arts education organizations in the region and developed a business plan and three-year strategy. She had no background in running a nonprofit and wasn't an artist herself, yet Fitzhugh set about to woo funders and break into the artistic community.

"In the beginning I had a lot of trouble. People would say, 'Who is Arts Corps and where did she come from?' " she says. "The arts world is really closed, and when new people come in, there's this kind of response: 'Well, where have you been?'"

Former Mayor Paul Schell admits he was surprised when Fitzhugh called to solicit his support—not because she was starting a nonprofit, but because she was taking on such a challenge. "People like me might have thought her naïve to assume she can do that, but she doesn't have any limits," he says. "She has that revolutionary, 'Nobody's going to tell me I can't do this' spirit."

Fitzhugh acknowledges that her naïveté was a blessing, because it shielded her from the harsh reality of relentless fund-raising. Yet she discovered a creative bent after all: a talent for writing and public speaking. Like the most rousing and inspiring of preachers, she possesses the ability to inspire people to believe and take action.

"She really had a vision that seemed unique, but more than that, it seemed to make sense and she knew how to do it," says Susan Trapnell, former executive director of the Seattle Arts Commission and one of Arts Corps' initial funders. "And it was that combination that gave me complete confidence that if she said she was going to go out and do this, she was going to go out and do it."

A colorful sunrise mosaic tiled by Arts Corps students surrounds the office entry at St. Therese, a private school in Seattle's Madrona neighborhood where Arts Corps leads classes. Three-quarters of its student body are minorities, most of whom are African-American.

Like many facilities that contract with Arts Corps, St. Therese School doesn't have a dedicated art classroom because of budget limitations. Since Arts Corps supplies teaching artists and administrative support in exchange for a subsidized fee, its model is appealing to cash-strapped schools.

"To me, this is the way all schools should do arts," says principal Eileen Gray. "I couldn't buy a teacher with a benefits package and get this breadth of experience. For \$17,400, I get hip-hop, comics and animation, exploratory painting—

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Top to bottom, Fitzhugh visits an Arts Corps class at St. Therese School; students demonstrate what they've learned during an end-of-the-quarter performance at Seattle Center; composing music at an Arts Corps afterschool program

Lisa Fitzhugh

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I just get to dream up good stuff and I don't have to find anybody to teach it."

Arts Corps teaching artist Lauren Atkinson is known as the "art cart lady," since she uses the boiler room as a home base and parades a wheeled cart bulging with supplies from room to room. Today she's showing 16 third-graders how to tell a story of their earliest memories using only pictures. Ten minutes into the exercise all hands are waving in Atkinson's direction, each student eager to share his or her story.

"I like art because you can do whatever you want in your imagination," says a girl in a cherry red jumpsuit. "You can draw anything, and you can't mess up because you can fix it," adds a soft-spoken boy across from her.

Student comments like these underscore Arts Corps' motto: "Make Art Anyway." It's not about proficiency, outcomes or producing master artists—it's about giving children opportunities to plumb their own creativity and discover what they're capable of.

That experience of unearthing creative potential is one Fitzhugh believes she missed out on in her own childhood by avoiding anything related to the arts. She is reconciling that today by creating and growing Arts Corps and advocating for children from impoverished and chaotic backgrounds.

Eba Hilario describes her 9-year-old son, Gabriel, as "an internal kind of person." She saw a new side of him emerge through Arts Corps drama classes, offered after school at Martin Luther King, Jr. (MLK) Elementary School.

"What Arts Corps provided was the confidence," Hilario says. "It's internal inspiration. You need inspiration to go beyond just the math and the hardcore basics of education."

Yet art is often the first to go at schools facing budget cuts. Fitzhugh is frustrated with naysayers who believe drama, dance and music are dispensable. The less-tangible benefits of art making, such as ingenuity, and confidence, continue to be trumped by a narrowing focus on traditional disciplines that yield measurable results, she says.

Besides classrooms and gymnasiums, Arts Corps classes have sprung up in community centers, portable trailers and libraries. Pearl Jam's Stone Gossard, one of Arts Corps' founding investors, offers the

use of his recording studio, Studio Litho, for students to learn about music production and cut their own CDs. The All City Choir, a gospel group cosponsored by Arts Corps and Seattle Center, draws teens from all over the city.

"It's not some prepackaged, canned curriculum," says Christine Goodheart, executive director of the Office of UW-Community Partnerships. "The artists are allowed to shape their own educational lessons out of their passion and their artistry, which is fantastic."

In less than five years, student participation in Arts Corps has climbed from 250 to 2,100 and the number of participating sites from six to more than 30. Hilario and other parents urged MLK principal Barry Dorsey, whose own children thrived in Arts Corps classes at St. Therese, to adopt Arts Corps into MLK's curriculum, and last fall, Arts Corps' partnership with MLK marked its first in-school program with Seattle Public Schools.

"The thing that Arts Corps is doing to help them, the students, is to understand their own possibility as a human," says Fitzhugh. "If that work doesn't happen on a personal level, it won't happen in the world."

Not surprisingly, Fitzhugh's three-story Capitol Hill home brims with art, much of it inherited from family. Brightly colored walls of crimson, teal and mustard are accented by black-and-white photographs, original paintings and masks from West Africa and Mexico. Dramatic portraits by Fitzhugh's mother complement relics collected by John's father—a musk ox skull, prints of Arctic explorers, a shield sculpted from water buffalo hide.

When she's not running Arts Corps, Fitzhugh, now healthy, keeps up with her son, Jack, a towheaded 4-year-old. She also practices Qigong—a meditative energy practice—for many hours each week and attends yoga religiously—things she has embraced since her illness.

And she spends time honing her newfound talent for writing. She believes that making art—in any form—is making peace with one's authentic self, a deeply spiritual process of learning how to express, and then live, who you really are.

"Arts Corps has forced me to confront every last demon I've ever had," she says. "Creating Arts Corps is really how I've healed."

It is also Fitzhugh's masterpiece—and it's a work in progress. ●