"Oh, man. The arts? They’re everything. Man, I don’t even have words."

That’s what the barista said as I grabbed coffee while wearing my “Make Art Anyway” t-shirt. He began waxing poetic about the impact of the arts in his life, how he needs it every day, how our masks are art, how making coffee is art, how there’s an art to waking up each day. That’s when I realized how lucky we all are to be surrounded by artists. Artists create something out of nothing. Artists can move mountains and hearts with sound, a movement, a pen stroke. Artists help us see worlds we could never imagine, while examining realities that won’t allow us to look away. Artists make art, and that’s what we do every day at Arts Corps.

In March, Washington State implemented a shelter-in-place order that resulted in schools closing for the rest of the school year. This meant our teaching artists were suddenly without work, forcing our community to identify creative ways to compensate our team. Thanks to a PPP loan we received, Arts Corps paid all of our teaching artists for any work missed because of school closures for the rest of the academic year. We pivoted quickly, and together, created 15 arts-based video lessons and over 50 digital lessons and activity worksheets to do remotely.

When schools closed, 40% of students across the country did not attend virtual classes because many homes lacked the necessary technology to participate. Arts Corps saw early on that a digital format could not and should not be the only way to reach families. Sabrina Chacon-Barajas, our Arts Integration Program Manager, led the production of over 1,300 art kits that students could use at home. Each kit included new materials and instructions, distributed safely at sites where school lunches were also being delivered to the community. The youth, families, and our partners loved these art kits. Our vacant office has since transformed into a full-on art kit operation, where we will continue to assemble art kits for the 2020-2021 school year.

After the murder of George Floyd, Breonna Taylor, and countless others at the hands of police, teaching artist Greg Thornton initiated the Reach Express Action Community Team (R.E.A.C.T) project, curating creative community responses to the racial injustices and uprisings around the country. Now he is leading a similar project, Valued Votes, to increase voter participation. In one day, he and several recent graduates of Interagency Academy, registered 50 first-time voters.

In the summer, Arts Corps trained 15 K-8 teachers in the Highline School District on culturally responsive remote learning practices. Over four consecutive sessions, we provided their faculty with strategies and activities to increase student engagement and comprehension of academic content, while also supporting the social emotional needs of both students and teachers. We will continue to offer professional development for educators throughout the remainder of the year.

As one of a handful of arts education organizations still operating and employing teaching artists at this time, we understand the real value of what it is we do. Especially now. We see it in faces, in smiles, in our youth. So, as we navigate this moment in time, we must imagine another day. After some clarity and reflection, I have made the difficult decision to step down as Executive Director of Arts Corps. It is time for a new leader to take the reins as we head into strategic planning for the next five years.

It is with excitement and appreciation that I shine a light on Carrie Siahpush, Arts Corps’ new Interim Executive Director. Carrie has been a part of our organization for four years, serving as our Director of Development & Communications. I have no doubt that she will imbue this new chapter with her unique vision and gifts, and of course, guided by her passion to revolutionize arts education. This job has been life changing for me and I will always, always, always remain an avid advocate and supporter of Arts Corps. Through the ups and downs, this community has risen like a phoenix from ashes. And like a phoenix, Arts Corps will be reborn stronger, more united, and more resilient.

Stay Gold,

James Miles
Executive Director
Rather than reading an article & talking about it, we made art about it. The conversations were richer & more authentic.

- Classroom Teacher

Arts Corps reached 3,300 students in 2020.

4 out of 5 partners strongly agree that their partner teaching artists were effective & positive role models.

1,300 art kits delivered (Apr. - June)

5 of 6 of students are more willing to try new things, even knowing that they may fail.

100% of LIT students rated their classroom experience as excellent.

208 total classes

38 program sites

100% of surveyed students reported they belonged in their class, that they were connected to others in the class & built mentor relationships.

Net income ($232,967)

*Net income loss due to the impact of COVID-19 on fundraising. Good news, we have already made up the gap!"
We spoke with Heleya, our Director of Arts Education at Arts Corps. She’s also Sabrina, our Arts Integration Program Manager, about Arts Corps’ art kit project and how programming pivoted in March.

Q&A with Heleya de Barros & Sabrina Chacon-Barajas

A global pandemic. Now what?

We spoke with Heleya, our Director of Arts Education at Arts Corps, our Arts Integration Program Manager, about Arts Corps’ art kit project and how programming pivoted in March.

Arts Corps: When it became clear that school would not resume in-person, what was the process for figuring out what to prioritize given our limited resources?

Heleya de Barros: That assumes we were organized, which was just not the reality! We were running on adrenaline from March to July.

Sabrina Chacon-Barajas: I just remember Heleya being like, we need to put this stuff out right now and then me just acting on it. So, for example, those [digital] art guides? That was like, everybody’s at home and we need to produce things that families can have now.

AC: Getting something into hands.

SCB: Yes, getting something into people’s hands and also making sure that we were connecting with our teaching artists to make sure there was still a sense of job security despite the pandemic.

HdB: There was kind of a joke that everyone you ever bought a potholder from was sending you an update on their COVID-19 strategies, and on the other side of that, I noticed who I was not hearing from —云云．

AC: What is the value of bringing arts education and access to those particular communities?

SCB: I don’t even know where to begin. A lot of our young people come from different backgrounds. We’ve got immigrant students from African and Asian nations, we’ve got Latinx-identified students, also immigrants, and we have refugee students. They come into these schools and there are standards to abide by. Arts education is really about giving these students the opportunities to learn and engage in a classroom where — if the arts weren’t present — it would be really difficult for them. Art classes are necessary if we want all of our classrooms to be inclusive, to be safe communities.

AC: What has been the most challenging thing and the most rewarding thing since shifting to socially-distanced learning?

HdB: The most challenging thing was figuring out how to really engage virtually because our strength is being in-person. It’s based on relationships, on being in a room and in community together.

AC: What does the future of arts education look like, from your perspectives? Bleak? Promising?

HdB: Pass the Best Starts for Kids levy! Frankly, the best thing we can do for arts education is to not go out of business because if we all go out of business, the families and young people we serve, the educators we help to train, the advocacy that we do at the state-level to promote arts education all goes out the window. I don’t know what the future looks like, but I know we have to stick around. We have to survive. That much I know.

SCB: I view it as really hopeful. I think people are realizing that arts education goes beyond just being extracurricular, beyond leisure, and beyond just being something to do. Especially all of the young people leading movements right now, they’re doing it really creatively. How can we deny that arts access and education are needed? Eyes and perspectives are being opened.

It’s slow, but we’re on a very, very slow uphill toward it.

And it’s rewarding to know we are still providing access to our young people and that we didn’t have to lay off any of our teaching artists. I take great pride in that.
Cultivating Creativity

written by Christa Mazzone Palmberg, Development Manager

Over the past 20 years, Arts Corps has grown from a small organization serving a handful of schools into a regional force for educational justice. Our programs have expanded beyond after-school classes to include school-day arts integration programs, intensive social justice and arts trainings, immersive tech classes, and much more. As programs have changed and strategies have shifted, a clear constant has been a commitment to cultivating creativity among youth.

Reflecting on Arts Corps’ 20th anniversary for our Festa 2020 celebration, founder Lisa Fitzhugh said, “Right now, I feel like the system is still trying to get what it needs out of us. Arts Corps for me is a really radical revolt against that idea. Let’s go to school and discover who you are, access your personal power, so that you can become who you want to be.”

Arts Corps worked hard to provide students with an array of opportunities to reflect, heal, and respond with art this year. Our Creative Schools program reached students throughout the academic year, pairing teaching artists with class teachers to integrate the arts with core curriculum, thereby strengthening learning and engagement.

In the 2019-20 school year, Arts Corps engaged nearly 2,000 students at nine Creative Schools sites across the region. When schools closed, teaching artists continued to provide remote, arts-based lessons. One fourth grade teacher said: “I noticed students did their art assignments long before finishing their literacy or math assignments, which goes to show how badly our kids are desiring expression and creativity during this time.”

The myriad of pressures, frustration, and grief facing the youth and families we serve reached a critical point over the summer after the murder of George Floyd. Arts Corps teaching artist Greg Thornton invited his students and fellow artists to contribute to R.E.A.C.T., a creative forum open to all art mediums to respond to the injustices of police brutality. Arts Corps compiled the artworks in a book and showcased them through a social media campaign, including a piece by 16-year-old Grace Prichard. Grace’s piece boldly depicts George Floyd wearing a face mask that reads “I Can’t Breathe.” Along with the artwork she submitted to R.E.A.C.T., Grace wrote, “I felt powerful and a part of something bigger than me when I was making this piece.”

At Arts Corps, we believe that creativity is the most important tool in a young person’s toolbox for both academic and professional success. And we are not alone. A 2019 survey of employers on LinkedIn ranked creativity as the #1 skill employers are seeking.

This reality, along with the fact that youth of color from low-income communities face inequitable access to our region’s growing tech sector, inspired Arts Corps to launch the Learning Immersive Technology (LIT) program for high school students in early 2019. LIT participants engage in projects that integrate virtual reality game development, audio production, and 360 filmmaking in order to gain the digital literacy and critical thinking skills necessary to succeed in the field.

Fabian Hernandez-Angel, who attended LIT in 2019 and 2020, wrote about his experience:

“There are a lot of great younger artists out there who end up giving up pursuing what they love due to a lack of resources or external influences & doubts. This program can really benefit those people so the world doesn’t lose out on great creations.”

- Fabian, LIT 2019 & 2020

There are a lot of great younger artists out there who end up giving up pursuing what they love due to a lack of resources or external influences & doubts. This program can really benefit those people so the world doesn’t lose out on great creations.

- Fabian, LIT 2019 & 2020
Thanks to a place-based collaborative grant from King County’s Best Start for Kids initiative, Arts Corps has been working with Southwest Youth & Family Services (SWYFS), New Futures Program, and Geeking Out Kids of Color (GOKiC) for the past three years. New Futures has several sites in Southwest King County in affordable housing apartment complexes. They provide wraparound services for families and a variety of programming for youth. The place-based collaborative grant allows for GOKiC to provide technology-based programs and for Arts Corps to offer a variety of disciplines for youth grades K-8.

Throughout the year, youth explore theatre, dance, music, or visual arts at four New Futures locations. During the school year each site has two classes, generally one elementary and one middle school. In the summer we hold two weeklong, four-hour-a-day intensives at each site, giving the youth an opportunity to dig deep into an artform. Our program managers and teaching artists work with New Futures staff to ensure that young people are offered the artforms that peak the youth’s interest and engage their minds and hearts.

When COVID-19 hit, we did a quick turnaround and moved to distanced learning. We delivered art supplies, made videos, and held Zoom classes in an attempt to support the youth so they could Make Art Anyway. When the summer came, we morphed our two-week intensive into a two-week project. Art kits were designed and distributed with step-by-step instructions and how-to videos. Each project came with two Zoom check-ins to make sure the youth were getting time to ask questions, receive guidance, and share their creations.

Additionally, we organized a drive-through performance series. Teaching artist Erica Merrit did several stops and sang songs that the youth told her they enjoyed. Ashé Keita and her partner provided moments of joy through African dance and drum. Windsor Heights residents stepped out onto their balconies to watch, listen, and join in. New Futures staff came out and danced along or enjoyed a song. You can read site manager Lucia Martinez’ blog about the experience here: https://artscorps.org/a-note-from-windsor-heights/

This collaborative is successful because of people who care. SWYFS and New Futures staff work with families and youth year-round, providing programs and services that support in numerous ways. There is something special about being in a room full of youth who deserve to be served, but because of too many reasons to count, they often don’t get the opportunity to engage in extracurricular activities that happen at school.

We hope to continue this collaboration into the future. We just found out that our funding will be extended through 2021. This fall, the Best Starts for Kids levy renewal goes back to the ballot box for voters to decide whether the BSK initiative will continue beyond 2021.

Make Art Anyway.

written by Olisa Enrico, Out of School Time Program Manager & Community