

New Urban Arts Keeps Inspiring

After 20 years of outside-the-box artistic education for city teens, New Urban Arts shows no signs of slowing down

Posted May 18, 2017



For 20 years, city teens have been expressing their creativity at New Urban Arts
PHOTO COURTESY OF NEW URBAN ARTS

By Amanda M. Grosvenor

When you step into **New Urban Arts'** sunny, open space on Westminster Street during programming hours, the first clear impression is its upbeat, active vibe. Cheerful chatter fills the air as young people take part in myriad activities; some are stretching in yoga poses, others are drawing with colored pencils; two are painting an old sidewalk container that used to dispense *The Phoenix* and have gathered what appear to be materials for some type of collage. A youthful, creative, joyful feeling is all-permeating and infectious.

Each day from 3-7pm, students from local high schools are invited to New Urban Arts to pursue whatever artistic activities they wish to explore in eight core mediums, including visual arts, fashion design, music performance and recording, darkroom photography, filmmaking and printmaking. All supplies are free to use and available without asking, and volunteer artist mentors are on hand to guide the process as needed and to answer questions.

"We've filled up a building with as many creative tools as possible and artists who know how to use them," says Executive Director Daniel Scheifer, who estimates about a 10 to 1 ratio of students to artists on any given day. An average of 70 students will show up (it varies seasonally), mainly coming from Classical, Central and Providence Career and Technical Schools thanks to proximity, but almost entirely from Providence.

Daniel confides that the true goal of the program is much less about art than it is about relationship building: “If students want to just come and socialize, we’re fine with that. We affirm the agency of young people.”

To the casual observer, it appears to be working beautifully. Collaboration, teamwork and innovation sprout up organically in every corner of the building despite – or perhaps thanks to – the lack of structured activities. When we toured the newly finished downstairs level, kids were cutting out pieces of fabric to create tie-dyed outfits, which they then modeled or draped onto mannequins. A group sat crowded in a little recording studio with one of the mentors, cheering on the performance of their friend who had just laid down a new track. A couple of students were by themselves, playing with graphic design software and computer games. Some were sitting on a circle of couches, chatting as they thumbed through books.

NUA also provides after-school snacks, bus passes and homework assistance. Daniel started volunteering there in 2007 as a Studio Study Buddy, joined the staff in 2010 and moved into the president role about two and a half years ago. In 2011, the organization relocated from a smaller space a couple of buildings down, and is currently celebrating its 20th anniversary. When students are ready, NUA provides support for the college application process and assistance in putting together portfolios and planning for the next stage of life – whatever that entails. “Life After School Coordinator” Mara O’Day spearheaded the recent fourth annual “Not College Fair,” with 12 local vendors on hand to talk about apprenticeships, certifications, internships, licensing and other options for students who will not immediately pursue a college degree.

Because NUA gears all of its fundraising efforts towards keeping programming free for participants and relies on federal funding for 20 percent of its budget, potential federal cuts to arts organizations are concerning. Adults who participated in NUA programming as high schoolers recall that it made an often pivotal difference in their lives at a critical developmental stage, providing a safe haven and space for their creativity to flourish. Individual support will help ensure that this sunny, vibrant space is available for generations to come.

New Urban Arts

705 Westminster Street