

At the corner of Westminster and Dean Streets, past the roaring highway intersection and across from the drab concrete high school, sits a 19<sup>th</sup> century brick building whose eastern side has been transformed into a 12-foot high mural. The painting explodes with images of Providence: the familiar geometry of our downtown sky-scraper, a brown figure leaping upwards with a basketball in hand, and stern, baseball-capped boys seated in front of industrial high-rises. Near them stands a colorful group of people, holding a white sign that exclaims: “We are all one Providence family!”

On the building’s southern side, below a dingy second floor window that advertises the Rhode Island Clean Water Action office, full-length glass windows display art installations of collaborative drawing projects and the life-size recreation of a cozy kitchen corner. Stenciled in orange paint across the window are the words: “New Urban Arts”.

Inside, tables overflow with the ingredients for art projects – chicken wire, paper maché, buttons, drawing paper, plastic cups. Colorful tissue-papered lampshades form rectangular boxes over the hanging fluorescent lights. In the center of the room, two white cylindrical pillars reach up to the high ceiling, their tops carved into a Corinthian design that contrasts with the worn, paint-splattered wooden floors.

Above shelves of college guides and art books, a poster displays New Urban Arts’ mission statement. It reads: “Our mission is to build a vital community that empowers young people to develop a creative practice they can sustain throughout their lives. We

provide studio, exhibition space, and mentoring for young artists who explore the visual, performing, and literary arts through yearlong free out-of-school programs.”

Artwork by New Urban Arts students sits patiently on the white walls: Polaroids of family at Thanksgiving dinner, ink sketches, black and white photos developed in the adjacent darkroom, and immense self-portraits fashioned out of pages torn from Edgar Allen Poe books, teen magazines, and discarded maps.

The room hums with soft conversation and the rush of warm air through an old heating grate. Two teenage girls with neon hair and carefully concocted outfits stand at the entrance hesitantly. They soon spot a familiar face amidst the strangers: Heidi Born, who taught them years ago at Providence City Arts and is now one of sixteen artist mentors here.

Each artist mentor at New Urban Arts leads a two-hour workshop one or two afternoons a week for Providence high schoolers. After a thorough application process in the fall, mentors advertise their workshop for the semester on posters and students sign up for the ones that interest them. The workshops are informal and oftentimes morph into new forms of art. Heidi’s workshop is technically screenprinting, but today her student Rebecca is busy converting an old altoids tin into a collaged jewelry box.

Rebecca goes to Classical High School, a public “college preparatory” school across the street with virtually no arts program and limited after-school activities. Rebecca scrolls through slides of artwork on her iPod and stops at a detailed sketch of two babushkas – her parents are from Belarus - that she drew on her Italian homework. “I’m very ambitious with my artwork”, she explains, “I hate

things that are simple...I really like processes that involve a lot of work and many layers and lines with different mediums.”

Meanwhile, program director Sarah Meyer is giving the newcomers a tour. She brings them behind a temporary wall that displays photos from the recent student show and gestures towards the art supplies. “It’s like...being here, this is your art studio.” The girls stand, awed. They say that for years they “never had the guts to come”, but now that they’ve been welcomed, they pile the nearest table with discarded fabrics and within 15 minutes have started designing clothes.

This initial sense of trepidation is common to the New Urban Arts experience. “I looked nothing like the people who walked in and out, but soon as I did come in, I found it a very, very positive environment – it’s one of the places I like being the most,” says Aneudy, a recent graduate with a scruffy beard and curly hair that flops over his eyes.

Tyler Denmead, who started the youth arts organization in 1997 during an undergraduate independent study at Brown University, acknowledges that New Urban Arts is “a scary place” but says that “it should be initially because we’re asking people to do things that you don’t do otherwise....it’s going to be foreign and unfamiliar. Most people see this place as you have to be an artsy type to be welcomed, but some of the best stories here are where people who don’t see themselves that way find out this is a place for them.”

Such was the case for Jesse Banks III, self-proclaimed poster child for New Urban Arts who now volunteers there as a mentor. Jesse comes from a well-to-do Liberian

family that fled their country during the civil war and resettled in Providence fifteen years ago. While his divorced parents argued over custody rights, Jesse turned to the camera his uncle had given him for his eighth birthday. “It was a way for me to get out my thoughts...whether I was feeling sad or feeling happy, I would express it through visual form rather than verbal form.”

Despite his love for photography, Jesse was initially skeptical of New Urban Arts. At first he only came because he had struck a deal with his friend, Noah, that he would accompany him to the studio if Noah joined Jesse’s track team.

“I was like I don’t give a damn about art, so I come into the art studio and I’m greeted by a huge hug from what used to be a former program director, and I’m like, ‘Is this lady crazy? Why is she hugging people? . . . I thought ‘wow I like this. I don’t get much of this’.”

Jesse soon discovered the darkroom, and despite his parents’ protests (“they don’t want their children to be doing art; they want you getting dough right away.”), he eventually decided to make photography his profession. Jesse has held down jobs at various places– Friendly’s and Walmart among them – to support himself, but he has also found employment as a photographer for local papers, fashion ads, commercial enterprises, weddings, and as an assistant for other photographers.

Two times a week, Jesse saunters into New Urban Arts, consistently late but greeted nonetheless by friendly jokes. He sometimes brings groups of student photographers past solitary churches and public housing to the downtown, where the sound of clicking cameras forms a backdrop to constant gossip and conversation.

He credits New Urban Arts mentors for helping him approach art more creatively, but he dismisses any questions about his own style of mentoring there, explaining that he has to adapt his teaching every semester to the differing dynamics of the students.

Indeed, the diversity of student interests, skills and backgrounds is fundamental to how New Urban Arts operates and grows. Of the 150 or so students who sign up for workshops every year, 28% are African American, 28% Latino, 22% Caucasian, and 12% Southeast Asian. Students have come from 13 different high schools in the Providence area, although many go to the two nearest schools, Classical and Central. New Urban Arts sits on the border between Federal Hill, the West End, and Upper South Providence, and in the latter two neighborhoods, 36% of families live in poverty.

People at the organization welcome such diversity. Aneudy says, “I love ‘em. It’s fresh, it’s very diverse; all these people come from different backgrounds, so they all have an interesting story to tell about themselves.”

Some of these stories emerge on February’s annual collaborative open mic night, which is held at Youth Pride, a partner organization housed amid the industrial weathered brick buildings of Providence’s Jewelry district. Youth Pride’s mission is to create a space where LGBTQ young adults “can express themselves freely”, and on Friday afternoon, teenagers clad in Ecko hoodies and Fubu jeans sit in last-minute poetry workshops preparing to do just that.

Christmas lights adorn the walls and two stage lamps illuminate one end of the spacious, high-ceilinged room. Before the show, while students who have come from New Urban Arts mingle with members of Youth Pride, a group of people huddles in front

of the stage. New Urban Arts mentor Bremen Donovan, dressed in cowboy boots and a pink wool hat, is trying to convince her film student Johnathan, a tall, suavely dressed fourteen year old, to sign up for the show.

Although this is only his second semester there, Johnathan is already well known at New Urban Arts for his flamboyant dance moves, Spanish-infused English accent, and occasional loss of self-control. Miguel, another member of Bremen's film workshop, made a documentary last fall, "A Day in the Life of New Urban Arts", in which he re-enacted Johnathan's crash one Saturday afternoon into a New Urban Arts window that left large cracks. The film ends with a scene of Johnathan leading a Michael Jackson dance during Bremen's workshop.

Johnathan's film for this semester is an eagerly anticipated dance video featuring the misguided moves of Aneudy and Miguel in contrast to Jonathan's expertise. Despite his apparent confidence, he refuses to sign up for the show, and soon the group settles down to hear the guest poet, New Urban Arts poetry mentor Richard Edouard-Denor.

Recently selected to represent Providence at the National Youth Poetry Slam, Richard is a freshman at the University of Rhode Island and already one of the best spoken word artists in the city. Richard's shoulders and elbows are draped in a long basketball jersey but they still move gracefully to the cadence of poetry about his "Haitian princess" and the algebraic equations of love.

Richard introduces the performers from his workshop as "the real poets". His group is the most cohesive, focused, and productive at the organization, and they make

this clear during the open mic, delivering their poetry with uncanny poise, bellowing each other's names during applause, and knocking fists to congratulate each other.

New Urban Arts director Tyler has cleared a space on the food table and he sits there quietly to observe the dynamic between mentor and student, staff and friend, peer and peer. This seems to be Tyler's common demeanor. In a sunny corner of the New Urban Arts studio, he usually sits on a low stool and types away at an aged computer, updating the website, writing to potential donors, and assessing the organization's finances.

The studio's fluidity and occasional disorder belie its "clear [organizational] hierarchy", board involvement, and institutional stability. Although it is becoming harder to secure grants from foundations, Tyler says that individual donors, particularly alumni and artist mentors, are beginning to give back. He notes that at her wedding, a former artist mentor asked that all her guests donate to New Urban Arts instead of buying her gifts. This is a drastic change from New Urban Arts' early years, when Tyler was putting charges on his personal credit card to supplement the seed money he had received from the Echoing Green Foundation.

When asked how the organization has evolved, Tyler lets out a high staccato laugh and jokes, "Well, my hair is greyer, and no one came when we first started, and now a lot of people come!" He pauses and squints into the distance. "This was a personal vision which has transformed into a self-driven, self-sustaining, self-evolving community of people who make art together."

After “art”, “community” is the next favorite word at New Urban Arts, and for some people, the relationships they build when working here are more valuable than the work itself. Bremen, a junior at Brown, explains, “All the kids I work with here are incredible, mature people...mature in their understanding of community. They maintain the standards and safe space. Sarah plants the seed, but it wouldn’t hold together if all those students didn’t respect New Urban Arts and understand that it was something crucial to their happiness.”

Bremen believes this safe space is essential to helping students feel comfortable and confident enough to make art. However, it took her a few months to realize that creating such a space meant foregoing a structured, goal-oriented workshop style. “Class time is often shared with different mentors, so there’s never any cohesive group. I started to feel really frustrated because I felt like no student had a strong investment in what we were doing. I was really ambitious and I made up all these worksheets and the students were like ‘um...trash’...I realized quickly that if you have a day when you don’t have any artwork, it’s fine – it’s more than fine - because sometimes that propels you into a whole new relationship with your mentees.”

Although the artistic cohesion of her group is still developing, the social one is already strong. A week after the open mic, Bremen and her students Heather, John, Miguel are sitting in New Urban Arts discussing a potential partnership with a University of Rhode Island film professor. When he leaves, they “debrief” and decide they don’t want to sacrifice their time together just to get access to URI’s video equipment.



Miguel tips back in his chair and points at Bremen, grinning. “But get me an internship there!” Bremen responds with an equal dose of attitude: “Get yo’self an internship!” They laugh and the conversation morphs into horror stories of John’s recent college visits.

After several years of moving between his family’s new house in Florida and the homes of Cambodian relatives in Providence, John lives at his cousin’s house and goes to Central High School.” John applied to seven art schools for photography and has found five to be “ugly and bad”. He dramatically places his hands together in mock-prayer and moans “I’m not gonna get into RISD, so Hartford: please be good, please be good, please be good.”

Another artist mentor hears John’s entreaty and imitates John from the day before, holding up his arms hopelessly and collapsing against a wall. “Oh God, Oh God, I’m so happy to be back here!”, he yells.

The group continues joking but when someone suggests a dance move, the mood grows sober. “Johnathan’s not even going to finish his dance film,” remarks Bremen. Johnathan just learned that his Mom is moving the family to Florida in a week, so he’s home packing rather than finishing his projects at New Urban Arts.

John asks, “Why don’t we edit it for him?”

Miguel brings his chair back from its precarious tottering position and leans forward, his hands suspended in the air. “Yea, let’s make a...”

He and Bremen shout at once: “A tribute to Johnathan!”

That afternoon, Miguel gets out the camera and walks around the warm, sun-drenched studio with a microphone asking people for memories of Johnathan. The workshop members agree to meet the next week and edit the clips.

The group's sudden inspiration recalls Tyler's earlier assessment of New Urban Arts; "This place bubbles up from underneath and is a groundswell of energy and ideas that come from kids and artist mentors...There are very few places where people can have meaningful, authentic relationships with one another, and this is a place that demands that."

The film group, it seems, has met this demand. As shafts of evening light bathe the studio, John sits down with the two remaining students and eats his dinner from Subway. "New Urban Arts never made me a tribute when I had to leave for Florida," he complains half jokingly. "But they would now, John", someone assures him. People nod in silent agreement. They would.

The next week, creating the film proves to be more taxing than people had anticipated, and the group worries that there might not be enough content to make a movie. "It's just hours of Johnathan dancing around like a dying fish," one member complains. As the group struggles to create something before Johnathan leaves in two days, Johnathan's mother calls to inform New Urban Arts of a schedule change: the family will leave for Florida the next day.

Program director Sarah finds a going away card and rushes to each table asking students to sign it. Bremen sits with her film group as they absorb the new reality: no Johnathan, and no tribute film. Johnathan stumbles into the studio and after exchanging

distracted greetings with them, heads for the darkroom to immerse himself in the gloomy room's fumes one last time.

After the final glints of winter light have disappeared from the studio's southern windows, he emerges from the darkroom carrying a stack of earlier art projects, photos, and photographic negatives. He faces the remaining mentors and students.

"Okay. Bye guys," he says.

Bremen laughs: "Nu-uh. You aren't leavin' yet!" She walks purposefully to the stereo and hits "play". Soon the rhythm of a Michael Jackson greatest hit engulfs the melancholic silence of the studio. Johnathan drops his stack and joins the final, celebratory dance. When the music ends, Sarah hands him the card. Johnathan embraces the dancers, picks up his art, and ambles slowly towards the door. He says goodbye in a fragile, thin voice and walks a few steps.

"Bye", he says again.

Another step, and he cannot help but turn around.

"Bye", and he means it.

By the time the door closes softly behind Johnathan, it is past seven o'clock – more than two hours after Tuesday workshops officially end. This is not surprising though, given the nature of New Urban Arts. The most important experiences for people here seem to be the ones that occur outside of a strict structure: collage during screenprinting workshop, long conversations during film-editing hour, and spontaneous dancing after everyone should have packed up and gone home.