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Five Questions With: Daniel Schleifer



"Think of New Urban Arts as an intentional community of collaborating artists where mentoring is practiced at multiple levels rather than a group of pairings."

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Daniel Schleifer, interim executive director of Providence-based New Urban Arts, joined the nonprofit in 2007 to pilot a Studio Study Buddy program that combines academic tutoring with mentorship. Prior experience includes working as a policy researcher, organizer, grant writer, and lobbyist for Open Doors Rhode Island. He earned a bachelor's degree in ethnic studies from Brown University in 2004. Here he discusses the role of the nonprofit in the community.

PBN: You've been involved in development prior to becoming executive director. How will your previous role inform your new one?

SCHLEIFER: My duty as director of development was to ensure New Urban Arts' strong financial health through fund raising. I still have that responsibility, but my role in fund raising has shifted.

As director of development, I worked closely with our executive director for four years to prepare them for conversations with funders. Now, I'll be the one relying on the director of development to prepare me so that I can develop and deepen New Urban Arts' funding relationships.

The best thing about becoming executive director is that I already understand New Urban Arts' funding relationships, and many of our funders already know me. This gives me a lot of confidence.

As director of development, I was also responsible for a lot of New Urban Arts' fundraising communications. I'm very particular about the tone of our communications with individual annual fund donors. I will continue to write appeals and thank you notes, but I'll no longer handle the technical side, such as data entry and list segmentation.

PBN: What is the Studio Study Buddy program and how has the pilot you ran worked out?

SCHLEIFER: The Studio Study Buddy program is a service available to youth in our core program, Youth Mentorship in the Arts, which connects high school-age youth in Providence with local artists who volunteer four hours per week in our studio. Our programs emphasize the agency and leadership of youth participants. Youth conduct the mentor selection process and are free to choose how they participate. They enroll throughout the year, choose their own mentors, switch mentors, and develop independent projects.

The Studio Study Buddy program, which is still going strong, is an academic tutoring program built to be consistent with these values and practices. This means it's not mandatory; rather, we periodically remind young people, and our mentors know that tutoring is available. So when mentors hear students complaining about schoolwork, they connect them with a study buddy.

PBN: The nonprofit supports students as artists and leaders. How do you convince students and mentors that the two are not mutually exclusive and help them develop an artistic voice?

SCHLEIFER: For many of our young people, the creative process is one of the few areas of life where they have a lot of agency, so the connection between art and leadership is quite clear to them. They enter our studio with a vision, and they seek support from mentors and peers to achieve it.

Similarly, most of our students are coming in with a nascent creative voice. I find that most young people, when asked respectfully and genuinely, have something to say. We simply connect them to resources they wouldn't get otherwise – time, space, supplies, and caring artist mentors – that will help them develop.

The trickier thing is to help young people see that, as they develop a creative practice, they are also developing transferable skills like problem-solving, critical thinking, research, and learning itself. This is where modeling becomes so vital. Our staff and mentors become living examples to our youth of how creative people use their skills to live fulfilling lives, whether or not they are full-time artists.

PBN: Share a story about one of your successful youth-mentor pairings: how is the story a model for others?

SCHLEIFER: Think of New Urban Arts as an intentional community of collaborating artists where mentoring is practiced at multiple levels rather than a group of pairings. Consider the following story that illustrates our approach. (Students' names have been omitted to protect their privacy.)

Over a year ago, in May 2013, one of our mentors approached our staff to request that a freshman girl be part of our summer program. He felt that he was just beginning to build a connection with her, but that he might "lose her" because she was spending a lot of time with a new boyfriend, who was getting into trouble.

Our staff honored the request, and over the course of the summer and following school year, the young woman became a fixture of our studio and is now on a clear path to art school. At the same time, however, our staff challenged her mentor to find a way to invite her boyfriend into the space and see his potential for creativity instead of his potential for trouble. This young man is now a staple of our programs as well. He also brings his brother and friends to New Urban Arts, and he's quick to lend a hand to the staff and other students.

This is what's possible when we build a community around arts mentoring, but our approach can serve as a model to organizations in any sector. The key is that we've built an institutional culture around our central values and practices, so people at multiple levels of the organization feel comfortable challenging each other and being challenged to live up to those ideals.

PBN: How did the million dollar capital campaign to fund the transition to 705 Westminster St. work out, now that you've been there four years? What other fund raising are you targeting?

SCHLEIFER: The capital campaign was a huge success. New Urban Arts bought a building, renovated it on time, paid off the mortgage, and set aside a rainy-day fund. As a result, we are secure and ready to serve another generation of young artists in Providence.

Now, more students than ever are attending New Urban Arts. While our amazing program staff and mentors are keeping up with the demand, the studio feels crowded, and we are thinking about how we can expand to better serve our students.

Fortunately, there's a great opportunity on the horizon. The passage of Question 5 in the last general election means that, by next fall, the Rhode Island State Council on the Arts will soon be offering cultural facilities grants in the form of capital matching funds to arts organizations that own their spaces. This means we'll be looking for support to develop our basement – just in time for our 20th anniversary in 2017.