



Students team up with mentors to learn about art with New Urban Arts.

**SPOTLIGHT ON:**

# New Urban Arts

As budgets for arts programs are cut in the public schools, Providence students find a place to turn — and a creative refuge — in New Urban Arts.

**THE GOAL:** To inspire creative and independent thinking, while offering a place for young artists to find safety and stability through free year-round arts-based programs. NUA's biggest initiative is its mentoring program, which connects local artists with low-income students. "Our challenge is to authentically involve young people as real partners with adults in their education," says executive director Jason Yoon, who is soon leaving his post for New York.

**THE PROGRAMS:** Storytelling nights with AS220; conversations with creative types like Berlin-based comic book artist Al Burian (*Burn Collector*); yoga classes; poetry workshops; studio challenges. "We don't give students or artists a script for what they make or how they explore art," Yoon says. "We stress that they connect with each other in meaningful relationships."

**THE QUIRKS:** Interaction with nationwide projects, like the Photo Palace Bus, a

traveling school bus-turned-darkroom dedicated to old-fashioned analog photography. Students swapped their developing knowledge with San Diego-based Russian photographer Anton Orlov when his bus stopped on Westminster Street in August.

**THE IMPACT:** "Providence is great," says Yoon. "But the share of our students reporting that they qualify for subsidized lunch has risen from 74 percent in 2007 to nearly 90 percent. Our enrollment has doubled in the same time, too." Still: 100 percent of high school seniors involved with NUA have applied to college — and every year students earn full scholarships to RISD and other art programs.

**HIGH HONORS:** NUA has come a long way since four college kids and a handful of high schoolers gathered in a church attic in 1997 to put their big ideas into action. Michelle Obama even presented the group with a Coming Up Taller Award from the president's Committee on the Arts and the Humanities.

**WHAT THE STUDENTS SAY:** "NUA is a safe place that can strengthen people emotionally and artistically," one student told Yoon, while another said: "It's a strong and close-knit community, and a safe place to express myself." Those words are the truest measure of success for a group that strives, as Yoon says, to be a living reminder to invest in the creative potential of all young people. [newurbanarts.org](http://newurbanarts.org) -KRISTINA REARDON