

ARTSCAPE

Art kits for Providence students help keep the creativity going

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About this Photo




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High school art classes have had their own set of challenges during the pandemic. One Providence after-school program has come up with a creative solution to keep kids engaged in self-expression.

by James Baumgartner



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In a regular school year, access to art supplies can be difficult. Art teachers say they never get all of the supplies they want in order to teach their classes.

GARLAND: “Most of my classroom materials over the years have been self-funded”

That’s Susan Garland, an art teacher at Juanita Sanchez Educational Complex.

In a regular year, the students in art classes would share supplies like brushes, paints, and charcoal pencils. But this year, that hasn’t really been possible.

GARLAND: “Art teachers really felt like we were in a bind, we didn’t know what to do because we didn’t want our classrooms to be superspreader events, basically.”

So the teachers were very limited in what materials they could provide to their students. In some cases, kids were using just basic number 2 pencils and copy paper.



New Urban Arts operations coordinator Kevin Harper assembles Art Kits
JOANNA DONOFRIO

USTACH: “For an art teacher, that’s really hard. They’re extremely innovative and creative folks but if you don’t have the tools, then it’s really hard to be able to engage students and get them to go deep.”

That’s Emily Ustach, the deputy director of New Urban Arts. It’s an after-school and out-of-school time arts program for high school students in Providence.

Although they aren’t holding in-person classes right now, New Urban Arts wants to provide art making opportunities to as many students as they can. That’s where they got the idea to distribute art supplies to Providence public school students taking art classes.

They ended up making 1200 art kits to distribute to the students. Here’s some of what they have in the kit.



Art supplies included in the kits
JOANNA DONOFRIO

PRESCOTT: “Colored pencils, ruler, sharpener”

GARLAND: “It’s a watercolor kit. Huge glue stick. Oil pastels which is something I personally love to use with kids because they can be so expressive.

PRESCOTT: “It comes with this great bag” [zipper sound]

The bag is key because it lets the students take the supplies with them between in person classes and the virtual classes they take from home.

Christine Prescott teaches in the Providence Virtual Learning Academy, an online-only option for parents who don’t want their kids going to in-person classes.

PRESCOTT: "I think this is just fantastic, because I can ask all of my students all at once, ‘take out your 3b pencil, we’re going to use that right now in contrast with the 6b pencil, let’s see how these pencils work.’"

Susan pointed out that now, her students will have the same materials at home that they have when they meet in class.

GARLAND: “You know if they get really turned on in the class, you know they can - they don’t have to wait until the next day. They can do what I used to do when I was in high school: try to get home really quickly so I can do the same thing at home so I can avoid my other homework.[laughs] That’s that amazing feeling, that draw, that urge, that deep deep desire to keep creating.”

I asked both teachers what art classes and creative expression mean for their students right now. Christine Prescott.



New Urban Arts board member Corey Fontes assembles art kits
JOANNA DONOFRIO

PRESCOTT: “Sometimes students may need an opportunity to express themselves, especially right now. And I think that offering the ability to maybe tap into some metaphoric imagery of how they’re handling the pandemic or some of the other racial tensions that they’re experiencing in their

personal life. This may offer the students the ability to leverage the arts to take them to another level of expression. Which I think is really important since many of the students may feel isolated, being home so much.”

Susan Garland told me about the murals students have created at Juanita Sanchez that have themes of social justice and the Black Lives Matter movement.

GARLAND: “The murals themselves have become almost their own voice for our students. As they’re walking through the halls they understand this movement that’s happening. It makes them understand that they are actually part of something, they are part of the conversation that’s happening.”



Drawing by PVLA student, white charcoal pencil on black cardstock



Drawing by PVLA student, white charcoal pencil on black cardstock

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