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A Picture of Success

**DHS-funded Students Respond
Enthusiastically to Arts Education
Opportunity**

by Bruce Barron

About 20 young students and their teachers sauntered calmly into the small but elegant art gallery, their attention drawn primarily to a collection of framed photographs arranged on a side wall and several dozen ceramic lamps, cups, and bowls displayed on tables beneath the photos.

After they had admired the display for a few minutes, a teacher requested their attention and introduced the first presentation. The student explained the design of his lamp and thanked his teacher. “I messed up a square pattern,” he said, “but my teacher told me not to give up. I did another one in triangular form and it turned out better.”

Several students gave similar presentations. Then a teacher said, “Drum roll, please!” A curtain was pulled back, revealing a table with handmade medals for each student. The teachers distributed the medals one at a time, detailing the strengths of each youth’s performance as they did so. Despite one teacher’s warning about the gallery’s poor acoustics, enthusiastic applause echoed through the halls as the students joined in praising each other’s achievements.

The scene looked like the culmination of a course for art majors. It was not. The students were actually middle- and high-schoolers in day or residential placement at Holy Family Institute in suburban Pittsburgh. Their beautiful work was the result of an initiative, funded by Casey Family Programs and an anonymous local foundation, to give youth in the child welfare system access to the inspiring arts education resources of the Manchester Craftsmen’s Guild (MCG) in Pittsburgh.



A world-class arts education resource

When you have a world-class resource at your doorstep, you ought to use it. That was Casey Family Programs’ rationale for funding slots at the MCG for youths in Allegheny County’s child-serving systems.

Founded in 1968, the MCG blossomed artistically after opening a \$6.5 million facility in 1986. For 25 years its four studios have remained ahead of the curve, offering a quality and quantity of equipment (like the 13 enlargers in the photography studio) that amaze even university art majors who visit the facility. But Manchester’s target audience is not collegians; it’s inner-city high-schoolers.

The MCG is a classic case of staying faithful to a mission. It’s been 48 years since MCG founder Bill Strickland was transformed by his experience of high-school ceramics teacher Frank Ross, but the center’s teaching artists still reverently, repeatedly cite the Ross-Strickland mentoring relationship as their model. Whether in ceramics, design arts, digital arts, or photography, the message is the same: art is the medium, but the important transformation is taking place in students’ lives as they build skill, confidence, and self-discipline.

When the Allegheny County Department of Human Services (DHS) proposed a DHS-MCG partnership to the Casey Family Programs, the studios already offered an after-school program from 3:00 to 5:30 on weekdays. Some students paid their own enrollment fee, but the Pittsburgh Public Schools also purchased slots for use by city students, providing a model ripe for replication.

Using the same approach, DHS purchased 30 slots for students involved with its child-serving systems. Some were taken by the Mars Home, a residential facility in the north suburbs, which provided daily van transportation to Manchester. Most of the DHS students came individually by public bus or parent transportation. They mixed in seamlessly with other participants in the regular studio classes from Monday through Thursday and at open studio (when students can put extra time into their class projects or work on something additional) on Fridays.

But DHS director Marc Cherna didn't stop there. Why not bring needy students there during the day too? he wondered.

Manchester's teaching artists were game. Their Artists in Schools program had delivered arts instruction at numerous schools, and students from two nearby charter schools had come to the MCG frequently for arts programs. But many more logistical issues presented themselves. A daytime arts program would have to be squeezed into providers' existing education programs and integrated into students' Individualized Education Plans (IEPs). Moreover, someone would have to pay for transportation.

Of the various educational entities that came to exploratory meetings with DHS, one showed the strongest interest: the Holy Family Institute, which educates both day and residential students in Emsworth, a 15-minute bus ride from Manchester. "We want to give our students as many opportunities as we can," said Pam Kovacs, Holy Family's director of education. "The arts are a hugely inspiring area. I think the concept and the opportunity were excellent."

Ironically, DHS's successes in another area—reducing the total number of child residential placements—proved an obstacle. At the beginning of the 2010-2011 school year Holy Family had just 18 high-schoolers in residence, well under the target class size of 30—and some of those 18 were not residents of Allegheny County. Expanding the age range from grades 9-12 to 7-12 and including day students brought the number close to the goal; later in the year a few students from Pressley Ridge, another residential facility, joined the program.

Teaching artists rise to the challenge

Bringing troubled students to the MCG might seem, at first, as appropriate as holding gang fights in an art gallery. Its beautiful studios, furnished with top-flight equipment, have no special protection—no locked doors, no metal detectors, no security detail.

"Sometimes you wonder if it will work," said Dave Deily, who attended MCG after-school programs as a North Hills High School student and now serves as Manchester's director of youth programs. "When I came back here nine years ago, I thought that maybe times have changed. But when you tell kids that this facility is for them, they take care of it."

Integrating DHS-funded students into the after-school program, with its already established culture of motivated youths, went very smoothly. "Long before the DHS students came here, we were a haven for troubled kids," observed Jill Wiggins, who has taught in the MCG digital studio since 2003. "Some of our students come here not because they are so interested in art, but because they don't want to go home. Here they are appreciated and nurtured for who they are. So of course DHS students should be there, because one of the things we do best is give kids a safe place."

Walking through the packed digital studio on a Friday afternoon, as students compose original music on the studio's 20 computers using Sony Acid or Garage Band software, one cannot distinguish between the Mars Home residents and the gifted students from Pittsburgh Allderdice High School. "It's the quietest class ever," Wiggins commented. "They come in with their headphones and work. Making music with loops, anyone can succeed. We have some talented kids, but even the kids who aren't musically inclined have success."

Although the residential students' identity is invisible to a visitor, Deily knows who's who. As a reflection of the MCG's personal touch, the program administrator, not just the teachers, knows each student by name. He points out a few DHS-funded students and asks them to talk about what they have done.

“I’ve taken every class here,” says one young man, “and I’ve written 17 songs so far.” (Others point out that he performed one of them at a recent MCG event.) A girl from Mars Home states, “I can try more things and push for my goals.”

Deily explained the steps taken (including concealment of the Mars Home van’s drop-offs and pickups) to ensure that DHS students would not stick out. They receive the same treatment and opportunities as other students and are not tightly guarded.

That strategy carries a risk, of course, especially with troubled city youths whose rural placement was intended to separate them from their former surroundings. When two Mars Home girls disappeared one afternoon, DHS staff had to assure the MCG teaching artists that they were not responsible. As one of them said, “When a 16-year-old comes down to Manchester carrying two duffel bags and a bookbag, we take the position that it is Mars’s responsibility to suspect something.” (A signout process was subsequently implemented to prevent future disappearances.)

Digital arts instructor Jeff Guerrero described his first experience with a DHS student: “I’ve had such well-behaved, highly performing students that I was wondering [what would happen], but he blended in as if there was no difference. He definitely has confidence issues and has been a little more reserved, but we have been able to motivate him ... and he had a piece in the all-city art show.”

Guerrero later recruited another quiet DHS student from the music class after the boy expressed an interest in anime, the Japanese animation style taught in the digital studio. “He’s not an extrovert,” Guerrero said, but my class is full of kids who are shy during the school day until they start talking about their favorite anime.”

Some harder nuts to crack

The MCG instructors acknowledged that the Holy Family students posed greater challenges in various areas, including attention span, self-discipline, and how they expressed themselves.

While the MCG’s detailed curriculum (the photography curriculum includes more than 50 distinct skill goals) did not change, the approach to delivering it did. “We had to break things down to one- or two-day projects that could be completed in a short time, because [students’] attention span and patience weren’t great,” said photography instructor Melissa Jarzenske. “You had to have everything prepared and prepped, more organized than the after-school program, because if there is any down time you can lose their attention.” Having two instructors present helped to provide advanced assignments for better students and assistance for slower learners at the same time.

“They were more capable than I expected them to be,” said ceramics and digital arts instructor Keith Hershberger. “Maybe the biggest challenge was the range of capabilities; what they do and achieve on a good day compared to a bad day is very different.

“Ceramics is a very step-oriented process; things have to be done at various stages for the piece to come out successfully. We had to do a lot of juggling because some students did their work quickly, some of them well, and some of them sloppily. We get this in the regular program too, but it seems to be accentuated by things like having a bad day, or medications.”

“I notice that they can become defensive a bit more quickly,” Wiggins stated. “I am constantly reminding myself of these kids’ background and instability, and I try very hard to make them aware that I care about them. They want attention so badly, and they are used to getting more negative than positive attention.”

One sensitive issue arose when the Holy Family students began composing songs in the digital arts studio: their style of expression was not always appropriate for public consumption. MCG staff seek to turn those episodes into teaching moments. Deily said: “We don’t want to just tell them no; we try to explain that those things are not acceptable in this arena, and to have a discussion as to how they could get the attention they want in a more acceptable way.” Holy Family staff, given their direct line of accountability to parents and school districts, were more concerned to restrain overly explicit forms of expression before they reached other stakeholders.



Bumps to smooth out

Holy Family’s Kovacs, while enthusiastically praising the MCG teaching artists, succinctly identified a series of issues that she hoped to see addressed before the partnership enters its second school year.

One large challenge was the requirement that all Holy Family residential students would come to MCG twice a week. Unlike after-school program attenders, who came voluntarily and who could be dismissed and replaced by someone on the waiting list if they misbehaved, the Holy Family students participated as part of their assigned educational program. During the program’s opening weeks, counselors struggled with several students who, whether due to emotional reasons or because they disliked art, refused to get off the bus.

Hershberger expressed frustration that sometimes his ability to assist interested students was hampered by the need to play cheerleader with unmotivated ones. But when asked whether the program should be voluntary, he said, “That might be better for us, but I don’t know if it’s better for the kids. I would be afraid that they wouldn’t sign up because it’s unfamiliar to them, and in most cases, once you get them working they are excited.”

Several MCG teaching artists expressed a desire for professional development in working with special student populations. Fiscal strains at the MCG, which had to reduce staff levels and assign additional duties to its teachers around the start of the school year, prevented its teachers from participating in training as planned. Holy Family teachers mitigated this problem somewhat by assisting in the studios and maintaining consistency with their institute’s disciplinary program, but Hershberger reported a sense of ambiguity about who should be managing classroom discipline and how sternly.

The transient nature of Holy Family’s student population created difficulties, as students who left the institute in mid-year could not count on getting transportation to Manchester from their school districts; eventually MCG used some of its grant funds to cover student transportation. Kovacs also suggested letting students indicate their course preferences; eventually all the youths rotated to each studio participating in the day program, but some expressed early dissatisfaction with their first assignment.



Visible impact

Despite the various recommendations for improvement, there was unanimous agreement that the project achieved its primary goal of positively influencing youth in the child welfare system.

Josie Ramsey, a Holy Family teacher, noted the considerable planning required to fit other academic coursework around two trips per week to Manchester. “But looking at the kids, it was worth the hassle,” she declared.

“I really liked seeing how they could control certain behaviors and develop a sense of worth. When kids did misbehave and we left them back, they stepped up” and improved their behavior so as to be reinstated.

Fellow teacher Tiffany Costa praised the MCG staff’s “over-the-top excitement” and indicated that giving Holy Family students the opportunity to create and talk about their original work helped them gain strength to deal with other challenges. Jarzenske told an especially poignant story of one student who suffered through having a planned adoption fall through: “He came to us right after hearing the news. He was so sad. But someone on a tour of the facility had walked through the photography studio and bought one of his prints. We gave him the money and a ‘you sold your print’ certificate, and he smiled for the first time that day.”

Hershberger recalled a student who seemed uninterested in the digital arts studio. “Then when I had him in ceramics, he was an entirely different student. The main project [in ceramics] was to make lamps built from square boxes with decorations cut into them. It takes careful work to build a sturdy box. When this boy finished very quickly, I expected it to be sloppy, but it was very well built—maybe the nicest in the class. Then he started helping other people put their boxes together. He was engaged throughout the entire course, finishing his projects early but carefully and then moving on to help others.”

Another Holy Family student, who had problems with anger and disrespectfulness, was very interested in the music class. “We had a goal of eight songs and he finished only three,” Hershberger said, “not because he was goofing off, but because he worked so hard to make his songs just right. When we explained to him that, although he did not complete the required number of songs, he was still getting a grade of 90 because we could see how he was trying, he told us it meant a lot to him, and he started talking about how music was always there for him when he lost much of his family. Seeing that we respected him in this way encouraged him to respect us, and it became the basis of a positive relationship. Although his anger issues continued, we were able to deal with them from a position of mutual respect.”

First-year outcomes were strongly favorable. Manchester’s teaching artists documented a 90 percent project completion rate for the day-program students—quite impressive considering the many personal and behavioral challenges these youths experience. The 12 Holy Family students who were enrolled for the full year saw their average grade in their Holy Family classes jump from 85 to 95. Pretests and posttests using the HOPE Scale showed a substantial improvement in Holy Family student attitudes. These statistics and the evidence of life-changing impact on motivated students have left all partners enthusiastic about continuing to develop the program.

The DHS-Manchester Craftsmen’s Guild partnership, 2010-2011

- Approximately 30 youths in DHS’s child-serving systems attended the Manchester Craftsmen’s Guild after-school program, and students enrolled in alternative education at the Holy Family Institute or Pressley Ridge attended daytime arts instruction twice a week for 90 minutes per session. Due to the fluidity of alternative education enrollment, the day program served a total of 39 youths, with enrollment ranging from 23 to 27 during the year.
- The programs lasted for three trimesters of about 10 weeks each, with a celebration of student achievements at the end of each trimester.
- Day students worked in three studios: photography, ceramics, and digital arts. After-school students could choose among these three studios or design arts.
- Daytime students were assessed and graded as part of their approved educational program. Overall, the daytime students completed 90 percent of their assigned projects and received an average grade of 90.



Dan Onorato, Allegheny County Executive

James M. Flynn Jr., Allegheny County Manager

Marc Cherna, Director, Allegheny County Department of Human Services

Erin Dalton, DHS Deputy Director, Office of Data Analysis, Research and Evaluation

Allegheny County Department of Human Services • One Smithfield Street • Pittsburgh, PA 15222

Phone: 412. 350. 5701 • Fax: 412.350.4004 • www.alleghenycounty.us/dhs