

# COPRED PEACE CHRONICLE

THE CONSORTIUM ON PEACE RESEARCH, EDUCATION AND DEVELOPMENT

## Education in the Pursuit of Peace, Justice and Social Change

### KIDS CREATING REVOLUTIONS THROUGH ART

By Anya Hankin-Rappoport

It is about 115 degrees today—well at least it feels like it—as we wait in the blaring sun trying to get into formation. Keshawn stands at the front hoisting a huge paper-mache head—complete with a twisting mass of green hair, succulent red lips, and mismatched sparkling eyes—above his own. Two boys stand behind him—each holding one side of a pair of enormous shell encrusted breasts. Several kids squirm underneath the sea green fabric, which will serve as the body, and over a dozen more flank their sides with eight elaborately decorated octopus legs. This—ladies and gentlemen—is Art Start’s contribution to the annual Coney Island Mermaid Parade.

Margot, the Program Director of “Art in the Shelters,” does her best to orchestrate from the front. Still, as we march, the boys get tired and those mammoth breasts begin to droop. The leg holders, who periodically shake their tentacles in a mismatched rhythm, get distracted by the scantily clad women and blue painted men and somehow they end up in front of the head. Still, nobody seems to mind that our parts are in the wrong order. The sweaty, densely packed crowd shouts encouragement to our eclectic entourage. And our volunteers maintain an infectious chant to sustain moral. “Art Start! Art Start! Art Start!”

For the past three months, I have volunteered with Art Start, a not-for-profit organization that uses art to enrich the lives of under served youth. With three main programs—Art in the Shelters, Media Works, and The Hip Hop Project—Art Start opens their doors to young people often ignored by society; students in last chance high schools, correctional facilities, and homeless shelters. With a focus on media awareness and hip hop culture, the teens in the Hip-Hop Project and Media Works learn a valuable combination of self-esteem and real world skills.

Working predominantly with the Art in the Shelters Program I have seen children and their families come and go. I understand the significance of an event like this—which represents an important culmination of weeks of hard work. For a month now, the kids have been sewing and gluing—constructing this mermaid with an infectious enthusiasm. I have also been with them through drawing workshops, the making of a quilt, painting, portraits, and beading. I have heard their delighted cries each Wednesday when we make our way up the concrete stairs to room 231. “Art Start! Art Start! Art Start!” With enthusiastic consistency—these two words have become a joyful ral-

By providing a creative outlet in lives dominated by hardship, by developing a genuine friendship and respect with the kids in their programs, and by staying true to their commitment to art and service, Art Start is effecting an irreversible and revolutionary kind of change.

lying cry. For the kids at LIFE shelter, Art Start is synonymous with fun and creativity—a place where “we get to make cool stuff” and where “we always have a good time.” As soon as we are spotted at the front door—those words spread like wild fire, infecting the shelters’ younger population (and even some of the adults too) with eager smiles. Within minutes of our arrival, a dozen kids wait anxiously by the door, striving to be the first inside, to be Margot’s chosen weekly helper. They are supposed to wait in line, yet even with a volunteer overseeing, this semblance of order twists into the hallway. Shouts of excitement, tales of the day’s adventure—a lost tooth, a fight with an older brother—fill the otherwise quiet second floor with an excited clamor. Margot chooses the quietest five and they eagerly rush to help—filling their tiny arms with bags of beads, boxes of colored tile, stacks of watercolor paper, containers of pens. They lead the way up the stairs, down the hall—where we set up several new workshop stations. The kids are full of energy and anxious to work. At 7:00, the line quickly dissipates as the children gather in their respective project groups.

For the first several weeks I help thread needles and sew beads onto a “friendship” quilt. I bond with Davon, an older boy who after the second week of jointly stitching a mass of purple fur onto the head of a felt face tells me—“I like you lady. You’re real nice.” When I switch to the drawing group the following week, he is dismayed. “I want you to help me lady. Why aren’t you in my group anymore? I need you”. But by the next week he is gone. I ask around, but no one is sure where he is. I don’t see him again.

I am saddened, but soon realize that this experience is not about attachment. The shelter does not/cannot, breed attachment. Over the course of the three months, I see many kids come and go. The friends who stay behind don’t seem to be much affected. Coming and going is a regular part of their lives. Still, this reality does not appear to diminish their devotion or their excitement. I truly believe that if Art Start were to abandon their weekly workshops, the kids would feel a profound loss. Art Start provides them with such an essential, yet often overlooked element—creativity. It also offers a sense of stability, which in the transient existence of shelter life, is a valuable asset. Art Start provides a vibrancy to contrast the oppressive concrete and drab white walls. And Art Start’s vision—that art has the capacity to change lives—rings true with these kids. You can see it on their faces—eyes glowing with pride at their newest creation,

brows furrowed with concentration as they learn a new technique, lips laughing with light hearted enjoyment as they lift the mermaid legs up and begin to march...

Over my three months at Art Start, working with the kids at LIFE and Huntington House was surely the highlight of my experience. I was also introduced to other elements of the non-profit. Witnessing the talent and incredible charisma of the teenagers in the Hip-Hop Project gave me a glimpse of a world so profoundly different from mine that it is beyond compare. I can only say that I am very grateful for having the opportunity to catch a glimpse of their confidence, their confusion, and their commitment to succeeding.

Art Start does not merely exhort revolutionary rhetoric about how to change the world, they take those concepts personally—establishing a diverse workplace where kids who once attended these workshops can now lead their own. Art Start offers this kind of support on both an intimate and public level. By providing a creative outlet in lives dominated by hardship, by developing a genuine friendship and respect with the kids in their programs, and by staying true to their commitment to art and service, Art Start is effecting an irreversible and revolutionary kind of change. I feel privileged to have had the opportunity to work for an organization that not only embraces a proactive and awe inspiring mission, but practices what it preach in the ultimate of ways. ♦

*\*Anya Hankin, a junior at Evergreen State College, who interned with COPRED in Winter 2001 spent her Spring quarter interning at Art Start in New York City where she volunteered in two homeless shelters and helped to establish an ongoing Performing Arts workshop for those children.\**

