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University Honors
Thesis Project

The Importance of Free Creative Outlets in Communities

I have been an artist all of my life. As an artist I have come to understand the importance of art as a means of communication. It is vital for human beings to express themselves. We live in a country that is founded on freedom of expression, yet there are not many outlets for people to use for self expression. In our modern world of technology people are becoming more and more alienated from one another. The nature of modern life keeps people separated. We now communicate over the internet, never seeing the faces of those we “talk” to. Computer chat rooms are hardly a suitable substitute for a face to face conversation. People substitute television and virtual reality for real experiences. These virtual experiences exclude the necessary components for real human companionship, communication and understanding.

There are not many physically existing places for people to congregate and communicate in today’s communities. Our cities are full of stores and mini malls offering every product and service imaginable, yet there are not places or means for people to meet eye to eye and speak their minds. There are not social institutions for our population. The only places that even come close are you neighborhood coffee shop or the bar. Once again, these places are businesses offering products and services rather than providing any sort of free creative outlet for the community.

Most people lead a very transient lifestyle and often move in and out of communities regularly. The result is the decay our communities. People very rarely know their neighbors any more or have a real understanding of the tribulations facing

their communities. The transient nature of the average American family is contributing to the decay of our local communities. Teenagers have no place to congregate outside of school in a social setting. Seniors often lead quiet lives of solitude, with no opportunities to interact with their peers or younger generations. We are lost. We need a place to congregate, communicate and learn from one another. It is the only way to conquer the plight of our community. Free creative outlets are necessary for the survival of our society.

I have found a place in our community which provides a space for the community to express themselves. The Douglass School Art Place in Murphysboro is actively providing our local community, a place to come together and participate in an on going discussion about the human experience. The Douglass School houses numerous artist studios, a hot glass studio, as well as a theatre and an exhibition space. The Douglass school was created for the community that surrounds it.

The idea for the Douglass School was brought to life by Jan Thomas and Gretel Chapman. Their dream was to build a place for the community to gather and communicate through the arts. They began their journey by purchasing the Douglass School. The Douglass School was built in 1897 and had been one of the last segregated schools left in Illinois. Once schools became desegregated, the building sat abandoned for many years. Jan and Gretel decided to keep the original name for the Douglass School. The school was named for the abolitionist and one time slave Frederick Douglass. They felt that keeping the name would pay homage to Douglass and his ideals of liberty and freedom for all. Jan and Gretel wanted to liberate people in our community from an internal bondage, through creative expression. Both Jan and Gretel are artists

with back grounds in academia. Jan graduated with an MFA in glass and Gretel with a graduate degree in art history. Jan Thomas stresses the importance of art in our society, "My current definition of art is anything that you do that you don't have to do. If you take the mystique out of art, you make it available to everyone. Everyone is creative. Making art makes you feel good."

The Douglass School first opened its doors in 1995 and had its first art show shortly there after. This first show was called "The People's Art Show". The purpose of this art show was to gather the community and collect funds for projects that would directly benefit the local people. The show was organized with the Bridge wood Residence Council, which is the community which sits just east of the Doug. The first "People's Art Show" was an enormous success and has since become an annual event. This was the beginning of many art shows, theatre performances and studio demonstrations yet to come. The Douglass School now hosts many different types of events all with our community and creativity at their heart.

I was tremendously moved upon visiting the school and talking with Jan Thomas. She told me that since Gretel had died of cancer a few years back she was now the sole person responsible for the fate of the Doug. She has been fortunate to receive help here and there from various members of the community. Cameron Smith a local glass artist and contractor shouldered an equal amount of responsibility. The two artists work industriously to keep the 110 year old building from disrepair, while also running the hot glass studio. The glass studio in itself is a full time job. Jan, Cameron and Cameron's 13 year old son produce incredible art glass which they sell at local art shows. They have been very successful with their glass, winning best in show at last years Cedarhurst craft

fair. The problem lies in the amount of work that must be done. Jan and Cameron often spend 12 hours a day at the Douglass School working in the glass studio and maintaining the building. Their glass business takes up an incredible amount of time. They desperately need help from the community, especially students to keep the operation going. I decided to help.

I decided to offer 20 volunteer hours a week to the Douglass School for an entire semester, as my University Honors Thesis project. As an art student at SIUC I have been involved in many student organizations related to art. I have had a lot of experience organizing art exhibits. I offered to organize and coordinate all of the art exhibits for the semester. I scheduled five art shows for the semester. This required me to find artists to display their work promote their event and host the final art show. Each art show brought a unique and diverse crowd to the Douglass School, exposing different subcultures of this area to each other. We were pleased to see people initiating conversations with others concerning their own experiences and opinions. I had an amazing experience as a part of this community conversation. I learned how to organize people together through a common goal. I learned through these experiences how much each of us has in common, if we are given the opportunity to share.

I also volunteered to work in the glass studio. I learned the inner workings of a glass studio. I learned how to build and maintain studio equipment as well as how to make colored glasses. I also learned how many new glassblowing techniques that I had not learned at SIUC. I learned that with an incredible amount of determination it is possible to be a glass artist. I learned that it is possible to own and operate your own glass studio and make a living. I learned how to make my glass career possible. Most

importantly I learned the importance and significance of artists in society. I know now that being an artist is not an inherently selfish career choice. Through my art and the art of others I have a unique opportunity to bring people together.