

Chicago Illinois

Gallery 37

Once there was a vacant lot, Lot Number 37, across the street from Marshall Field's in the Chicago Loop. It was slated to contain an office building, but an economic recession was keeping it empty. In 1991, the Head of the Department of Cultural Affairs and the Mayor's wife came up with a plan to fill Lot 37 with a huge tent. They would hold a summer-long program of visual arts activities for young people and pay the kids, as apprentice workers, with job training funds. The story goes that when the Mayor heard of this idea, he pooh-poohed it as ridiculous. When told that his wife was a co-creator of the concept, he dubbed it a "great idea," and Gallery 37 was born.

Job training and exemplary mentoring programs are an integral part of Gallery 37 classes. Each class has a Lead Artist and Teaching Assistant who mentor the students, as well as several Senior Apprentices. "All of this," says Lead Artist Miriam Socoloff, "creates relationships among kids from different backgrounds. Their interactions are important to them because they are based on their respect for each other's work. Everyone is aware of the problem-solving nature of art work. They are appreciative of each other's process and they are open in their praise of each other. Then other divisions start to break down. I remember two sixteen-year-old girls from the summer program. One black, one white. Both grouchy and resistant to outside criticism. It was hard for me. But both girls were supportive of each other; and, that summer, they took under their wing a third student, a mentally handicapped girl. One day, under the tent, I heard music on the radio and I...saw all three girls belting out "You Make Me Feel Like A Natural Woman." And suddenly I was less resistant to them, and everything improved."

Listening to music in the art studio, and "listening to the students talk to each other, and giving them a chance to talk to me," says Socoloff, "can start to form in-depth relationships. Art is a good way into the lives of teenagers. Art is personal. And so is life. Things happen when you put them together."

One of Socoloff's former students, a young man who is now a BFA candidate at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago, "came back to us a day before our tenth anniversary celebration," says Rachel Webster, Gallery 37's Public Relations Coordinator. "He is a pretty shy boy, quite religious, from a pretty dangerous neighborhood. His church had sold candy, taffy, and apples to raise money to send him on a Gallery 37 trip to study art and art history in Paris; he had graduated from our programs and started college. He wanted to express how our programs had affected his life, so, that day, wearing a three-piece suit, he came into the summer tent carrying several large three foot by three foot pieces of wood under his arms and on his back. Put together, they formed a life-sized self-portrait of his crucifixion. 'My old life died here,' he told us. 'As I sat in church so many Sundays and watched my cousins disappear to violence and jail and dead-end jobs, art resurrected me as a new person. It's frightening, too, in a way, but that is who I am now.'"

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