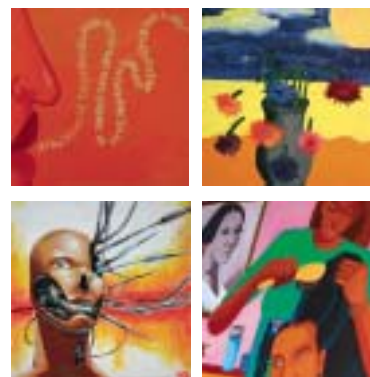


# Arts and the City

## Tapping the Creative Energy of Urban Youths

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*When visitors enter the offices of the Nellie Mae Education Foundation, they are often taken by the art on display. The collection is striking and vibrant. Like all good art, each piece makes a statement—sometimes quietly, but boldly. And when foundation staff proudly tell guests that the exhibit was created by Boston high school students, the reaction is frequently one of astonishment.*

*The artwork is the creation of student-members of Artists for Humanity (AFH), a nonprofit social enterprise whose mission is to provide urban youth with keys to self-sufficiency through paid employment in the arts. The foundation has partnered with the after-school arts program since 2000. At least once each year, foundation staff select pieces of work by the young artists for display in their Quincy, Mass., office.*

*The Nellie Mae Education Foundation provides grants to programs that take on some of the most critical obstacles to educational success, and one of its four areas of focus is after-school learning. Students who participate in after-school programs, especially underserved students, tend to be more engaged in learning, have improved attendance and grades and higher achievement in reading and math. Long-term investments, such as the one the foundation makes in AFH, represent the best strategy for high-impact grantmaking.*

Painting by Freddy Guerrero.



### Artists for Humanity

Founded in 1991, Artists for Humanity began by producing large-scale collaborative paintings reflecting the cultural diversity of urban communities and then marketing the work to Boston businesses. The program

evolved into a structured, four-year paid apprenticeship program that pairs teens with experienced artists in fine and commercial arts. Participants learn about AFH through friends, schools, community centers, referrals and city-sponsored recruitment events. AFH now employs 100 young people each year.

AFH is open to all teens from the City of Boston who are between ages 14 and 18, enrolled in school and have a desire to work and learn. Demonstrated artistic ability is not a requirement but the desire to have a voice is. AFH believes young people's belief in themselves is inextricably linked to their academic accomplishments. Working at AFH studios engages young people in the creative process, through which they experience free thinking, the courage of their convictions and trust in their individuality. A context of respect, responsibility and mentoring defines the AFH experience and fuels students' drive to succeed.

Artists for Humanity does not impose any artistic style on students. But constructive critique figures prominently in the mentorship. Mentors spend part of each day providing teen participants with one-on-one tutelage, which enables them to discuss the work's direction, give constructive advice on techniques and ensure that the participant is working to his potential. Once a week, each studio has a group critique, in which individual teens present their works in progress to their peers. The young people compare the project's development with the artist's intentions. In the process they learn from each other in a supportive environment. They also begin to understand the value of relating to others and exchanging ideas.

All AFH participants first complete 72 volunteer hours during which they participate in regular studio activities. The volunteer hours allow the youths to determine whether AFH is a good fit for them while they earn school credits for community service. Upon completing the volunteer requirement, the young people begin earning wages (from minimum wage to \$9 per hour) as well as a 50 percent commission on all sales of their fine art (100 percent if they broker the sale themselves).

AFH has fully equipped, staffed studios in five artistic media: painting, sculpture, photography, silk-screen and graphic design. Studios meet after school during the school year and weekday afternoons during the summer. Students are placed with professional urban artists and young artist mentors where they learn to create and eventually sell their own artwork. Their work is often exhibited in the offices of nonprofit and business organizations, as well as galleries and busy public spaces. One of their pieces, a contemporary

version of Gauguin's *Where Do We Come From? What Are We? Where Are We Going?*, is on permanent display at Logan International Airport's Terminal E.

Photo by Artists for Humanity photographers.



**Artists for Humanity's painting studio in action.**

a world of vocational options, including fine and commercial arts.

Arts education fosters high expectations by asserting that a young person's voice has meaning. When offered creative forms of expression, young people are inspired by vision. AFH provides youth with the opportunity to express their voice in positive ways that are valued by others.

Through hands-on experience in creativity, teamwork and self-governance, AFH also provides young people with the necessary guidance and tools for a successful transition to adulthood. This intrinsic component of art instruction advances cognitive and creative growth, which in turn, has a powerful impact on personal, academic and professional lives.

Unfortunately, the questions and creative thoughts that motivated the world's great philosophers, scientists and mathematicians are in jeopardy, as public schools emphasize curricula designed for standardized testing. Students need a fuller educational experience, one that

### Arts education

Research strongly links arts education with student achievement and self-esteem. Creative expression inspires students to ask the questions that lead to discovery—about themselves and the world. This helps them learn to make good choices and opens up

teaches them to pose questions as well as to answer them. Arts education offers this fuller experience.

### Nurturing achievement

More than one-quarter of Boston public school ninth-graders will never finish high school. But all the Boston youth working at Artists For Humanity graduate from high school and continue

on to higher education and career opportunities. For the past four years, all but two of the high school

seniors working in AFH studios were headed for colleges and art schools, including Boston University, Massachusetts College of Art, New York University, Northeastern University, Pratt Institute, Rhode Island School of Design, the University of Pennsylvania and Vassar College.

When teens join Artists for Humanity, they grow and mature in ways they never imagined. When Jonathan Banks entered AFH studios in the summer of 2001, he was a lonely, unsure 15-year old who had been in foster care for many years. After he completed his first painting, he exuded sheer joy. Told that his painting was good, he began talking about his next project, and a wonderful dialogue began between Jonathan and AFH artists. Jonathan grew in trust and self-confidence, bolstered by the experience of creating something from nothing within a supportive environment. He eventually became a peer mentor in the photography studio, and was selected to serve as a Teen Ambassador for AFH's Mellon City ACCESS partnership, a role that positioned him as a representative of the arts organization before Boston business and community groups. Last year, Jonathan graduated from high school with honors, and is now attending the Art Institute of Boston on full scholarship. He still keeps in touch with people at AFH and visits the studio.

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AFH has the highest expectations of young people—as artists, entrepreneurs and students—and they strive to meet these expectations.

AFH complements the learning opportunities available in public schools, but also serves as an advocate for a stronger arts presence within the academic environment. While AFH employs 100 young people a year, thousands more miss being exposed to art education opportunities. AFH seeks to ensure that all young people have access to the life-changing experience of the creative process; the opportunity to hone their questioning skills and discover new forms of expression; and the chance to explore the arts as a valid career choice. After all, these students could be the next great philosophers, scientists and mathematicians.

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*Susan Rodgerson is founder and artistic director of Boston-based Artists for Humanity. Blenda J. Wilson is president and chief operating officer of the Nellie Mae Education Foundation in Quincy, Mass.*

Photo by Artists for Humanity photographers.



**Cassandra Lattimre, youth participant at Artists for Humanity, works on her self-portrait.**