Erasing Boundaries with Language of Art

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Can two hours of creative expression help channel and nurture inner strength, confidence, and the positive focused resolve required to propel forward in the face of imminent challenges? This question led me to develop a series of artist-led workshops held at various area community and social-service venues serving groups outside the mainstream arts scene.

On a recent afternoon, nine refugees, three of whom had just arrived here from the Democratic Republic of Congo only five days earlier, miraculously found themselves painting, creating, and laughing — joy in a safe, welcoming community. These artists were all clients at Integrated Refugee and Immigrant Services, an organization that helps resettle refugees.

Teaching artist Shaunda Holloway demonstrated fabric-painting techniques on Plexiglas. I could feel the pulse of energy and excitement, and the quiet buzz in the room as participants, completely transfixed and engaged in the moment, gathered around the plastic-covered table. Shaunda applied pressure, working the blender in a circular motion to transfer images onto prepared lengths of fabric that would become uniquely created scarves. Two hours flew by, barely enough time to squeeze in an afternoon’s worth of printmaking instruction. For all of the participants, two hours immersed in a creative endeavor was a welcome break from the challenges that lie ahead. Immediate basic survival needs have to be met within a narrow time frame — finding an apartment, a job, a school, a health clinic, clothing, food.

Mask-maker Enok LeVera also worked with refugees at IRIS. For Enok, the object, music, and the historic narrative behind our cultural icons are inseparable. His workshop offered a rich, immersive experience that included stories, song, and dance. Enok held a mask to his face, as if it were imbued with magical powers. He broke out into a spirited dance as he led an attentive group through successive steps of constructing and painting. Once finished, the group, adorned in uniquely painted masks, completely swept up by the music and the moment, paraded through the cramped offices and into a large conference room, stunning a solemn meeting of tie-clad board members. I worried that the board might not appreciate a sudden, unexpected interruption, yet the parade ultimately, at some level, was a reminder of the organization’s objective — to help refugees make a difficult transition to a new world, a new life. In many of the workshops, no one spoke English. An intriguing “telephone-like” exchange ensued when Shaunda spoke in English, an IRIS volunteer translated her instructions into French, and a Congolese refugee then translated those instructions from French to Swahili while, simultaneously, an Iraqi refugee translated from English to Arabic. Yet, for the most part, no translations were needed. Art is its own universal language that crosses all communication boundaries. Rashmi Talpade, who conducted a few doll-making workshops this past year, agreed.

“The most interesting aspect of this workshop was the language barrier, which proved no barrier at all,” she said. “I spoke not a word of Spanish and at least six of the nine participants spoke no English, however we had no trouble communicating.” Likewise, neither gender nor age offered a barrier to creative pursuit. Folks at Tower One, a retirement housing community, were initially reluctant to try their hands at beading due to arthritis, cataracts, and other physical constraints, yet became entranced by the tantalizing, brightly colored beads in front of them and soon overcame their fears long enough to construct beaded dolls. At workshops held at the Dixwell/Newhallville Senior Center and the Slocum Branch of the New Haven Free Public Library, men started out “just watching”... but... “The most interesting aspect of this workshop was the language barrier, which proved no barrier at all.”

— Rashmi Talpade

as women cut fabric and fashioned Afro-Caribbean dolls with artist Elaine Peters. At the end of two hours, they were all doll-makers, crafters, and storytellers.

Whether these projects involved drawing mandalas in a quiet Zen-like setting, beading, or mask-making while listening to lively bomba rhythms, all of these artist-led workshops have allowed individuals, many of whom had never made artwork of any kind before, to transcend their daily routines and challenges and feel transformed in tangible ways. The artists leading the workshops, too, experienced a sense of transformation through sharing a part of themselves and their art with an eye to a greater purpose.

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