

The Art of Life



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After morning drop-in on October 16, I trooped down 2nd Avenue in the rain with six youth. The youth looked especially interesting that day – piercing, spikes, and black clothing with punk band names. I felt a little self-conscious in my social worker garb, wearing earth tones and carrying a manila folder. We were a mismatched and sullen group, headed to Street Life Art Gallery to check out a project in which the youth hoped to participate – painting art on city trash receptacles.

Street Life is a beautiful windowed gallery on the corner of 2nd and Bell, just four blocks away from New Horizons. Homeless and formerly homeless adults can drop-in and create art of their own for display or sale. As we walked in that day, several people were quietly painting, drawing and knitting as Classic King FM played in the background. Veronica (not her real name), a Street Life volunteer and coordinator of the trash receptacle project, led us to a large table where we dried off and got comfortable.

As Veronica led us through several exercises, the atmosphere of the place soaked in and the attitude of our little troupe transformed. I was relieved to see that the youth were very inspired by the proposed project. The youth began to talk with animation: “I have hundreds of possible designs in my journal.” “I’ve been an artist in the past, but I buried it until now.” “I’ve won awards for art.”

Four of the original six youth showed up later that week to participate in the project. Street Life had received a grant from the city, allowing their artists to paint art on over 10 garbage cans for a cash honorarium. (Apparently cans with art attract less graffiti.) Street Life invited New Horizons youth to participate by collaborating either with each other or an adult Street Life artist on a few of the cans. The youth each spent 10 hours over the course of a week to produce their works. They painted four sides and the peaked roof, using pictures, objects or their imaginations as subject matter.

As the project progressed, Veronica e-mailed me: *“The youth are doing a terrific job combining imagery and text. I think it is the most powerful can out of the whole bunch. Observing their effort, I noticed one of the truest, most egalitarian collaborations I’ve seen in some time.”*

We’ve learned at New Horizons that of all the needs our youth have, they are primarily in need of hope and joy. Yes, they need housing programs and school. Our kids, though, come to us feeling very defeated about their previous housing and school experiences. They need to know what is beautiful and exciting about life. They need to know why they would endure another “fresh start” in housing, school, or any program to which we might refer them. We try to offer many different experiences that peak their interest and help them claim the gifts and skills they’ve been created with. Isn’t this why we live, to grow into the people God created us to be? This is why, just this year, we developed the Life Discoveries program. (New Horizons has always tried to help youth discover their unique strengths through individualized experiences. Now, we have a budget and a focused program). Our collaboration with Street Life created another venue for New Horizons to awaken a few youth to their own abilities.

The youth were so proud of the finished product.

When one of the youth realized that his art and picture were on the cover of the *Belltown Paper*, he ran through drop-in, showing it to staff and other youth. I was like a proud parent when I received a subsequent e-mail from Veronica: *“It has been a pleasure to work with the New Horizons youth. We’ll be placing the cans [in the neighborhood] soon, and the youth want to see their can placed near New Horizons.”*

When you visit downtown, be sure to check out one of the cans right in front of New Horizons’ building!

