

## Money for Art and Your Kicks for Free

by Swanee Hunt, Scripps Howard News Service, November 25, 2003

Damon Butler remembers the first time he heard about Artists for Humanity like it was yesterday. “You see someone getting shot. You see someone else selling drugs. My friend told me there’s this cool place where I can get paid to make art. I figured, why not try this?”

The year was 1990. Damon Butler was a high school sophomore looking for a better way. Artists for Humanity was looking for talented teens to create art to be sold, first to local community members, then to colleges, corporations, hospitals, and a growing list of clients. Damon became one of the first artists hired by the initiative which now employs over 50 teen artists and which sold over \$200,000 in artwork and services last year. Damon went on to study illustration. He has since returned to Artists for Humanity as assistant artistic director.

In a visit to the downtown studio, I entered a room abuzz with activity: A group huddled around a computer designing a graphic project; two photographers reviewing contact sheets for photos to enlarge; and artists working at easels scattered throughout. Hip-hop music underscored the energy. The feel was at once energetic and contemplative.

“Magic,” Damon describes the atmosphere. “It’s like pixie dust is in the air.”

The dust worked its charm on me. Scanning the room, I took in paintings and photographs in progress; canvasses hung on all the walls. Conversations on art and design projects, a constant patter. An order of silk-screened T-shirts was ready to be shipped off.

The studio is an engine for these kids, many of whom come from homes without strong role models. The paychecks teach these teen artists the value of their own work. They take pride in seeing their creativity appreciated. The young people begin to take responsibility, meet deadlines, and tackle new challenges. “When I create a drawing, it’s for a company. Because they want something done, they give us money for it. That’s the way it goes in the real world,” explains Jason Talbot, who started at Artists for Humanity

along with Damon. “It propels the way you think. It made a kid who didn’t want to do his homework start acting like a CEO.”

In our society, the business world often seems divorced from the arts world. And America’s poor are shut out of both. But Artists for Humanity brings them all together. The result is a stronger community.

This potent mixture of art and entrepreneurship is gaining recognition. In 2001, Artists for Humanity was honored with the Coming Up Taller Award a presidential honor which annually recognizes ten outstanding programs across the country that provide creative learning opportunities for young people. Similar programs in New Orleans, Kansas City, and Los Angeles work with young artists to develop and market their work, and arts councils in England, Northern Ireland, and Australia are starting to look to art entrepreneurship as the door through which to reach disadvantaged and disengaged youth.

One of Artists for Humanity’s newer programs engages dropouts, employing them in a business venture during the day while requiring them to attend evening classes to earn a GED—equivalent to a high school diploma. All participants are expected to keep their grades up. Those who slip below a C must stop their artwork until their grades improve. But, as Artists for Humanities founder and executive director Susan Rodgers notes, in the past few years no one has been asked to leave for academic reasons. “They all know the expectations we have, and they meet them.”

It’s a simple proposition, for youth to meet expectations. “I tell them, ‘You can learn so much. You can do so much. You can be so much,’” Damon emphasizes. “At some point, all those positive words stick.”

And stick they did for 18-year-old Shawn McLaughlin, who’s come to Artists for Humanity for the past five years. “I don’t think I would have had any artwork in my life, if it weren’t for here.... Now I can’t imagine my life without it.” Shawn had struggled with feeling shy and withdrawn. His grades were terrible. But contact with supportive peers and the success of his work slowly coaxed him out. “My photography draws people near me.”

Everyone here has a role. Everyone contributes. And perhaps most important, everyone cares. “One person really dedicated to another can guide him along a path to being a great.” Damon’s life was drifting. Artists for Humanity helped him find his way, and now he’s helping others find their own.