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AS220, a community arts center, incorporates workforce development into curriculum

by Natalie Myers

When Marie Popko thinks about her teenage years, the word "intense" comes to mind.

Being in a military family, she attended four high schools in four years and in some radically different settings that ranged from Maryland to Manhattan to Staten Island to Barrington, Rhode Island.

Popko's experiences molded her aspirations. She chose to study art and psychology at the University of Rhode Island. Her ultimate goal was to become an expressive art therapist, a therapist who uses the visual arts, dance, music, writing as tools to inspire the evolution of consciousness in clients.

And having experienced being an inner city youth herself at one point, Popko knew she wanted to apply the profession to that population.

"I definitely knew that inner city is very hard," she said. "I feel like you're not attached as much to outlets such as nature and other things."

Five years after graduation, Popko finds herself at 27 in a role that suites her original intention, though she is not an expressive art therapist. Popko is managing director of The AS220 Broad Street Studio.

It is a transitional arts program open to all the state's youth, but that focuses specifically on youth recently released from the Rhode Island Training School, the state's juvenile detention facility. The program's goal is to break the cycle of recidivism in their lives through visual art, performance art and literary art.

"I think the concept is really great," Popko said. "To be able to infuse [young people] with confidence, with skills, with the idea that there are other things that they can be doing with their lives . . . That is extremely important."

Popko joined the nonprofit three years after it was founded by Bert Crenca, artistic director



Marie Popko and AS220 bring visual, performance, and literary art to inner city youth. It is located in downtown Providence. The art center also maintains artist live/work studios, galleries, performance space, and a community darkroom. For more information, visit www.as220.org.

photo by Reza Corinne Clifton

and founder of AS220.

She had taken an AmeriCorps Vista position as an art advisor at the Rhode Island Training School after substitute teaching for a year out of college. From there she quickly moved into a permanent, full-time position as coordinator for the community learning center at the school, a position she helped create by helping AS220 apply for a grant through the Rhode Island Department of Education.

"In this organization I went from carrying around art supplies . . . to spending most of my day worrying about funding and organizational stuff and structural stuff," she said. "It's kind of like a crash course in a lot of things."

Popko manages four full-time employees, one part-time employee and two AmeriCorps Vistas. And she is in charge of maintaining a \$450,000 budget.

Under her charge The Broad Street Studio has expanded to include a focus on the state's foster children and initiatives to incorporate workforce development into the curriculum in order to "make sure we are giving them everything we can possibly give them while they're here," she said.

In addition, each year the studio's earned income models have steadily grown.

Those youths participating in photography are getting paid for commercial shoots. Those in visual arts are getting paid to paint murals around the city. And those in the performing arts' Rhode Show, a youth troupe that encourages participants to express themselves through rhyme, rap, and spoken word, are getting paid for their performances at schools and community events.

As for the future, Popko said she would like to eventually do more international work.

"I've always felt a great need to do something big," she said. "I feel like I have a lot more to do and I'm open to understanding what that means when it presents itself to me."

But Popko will always be connected to youth. "I feel like teenage years are the hardest," she said. "So I'm always looking for alternatives for that time to be easier, more supported."

Natalie Myers is a staff reporter for Providence Business News. During the past year and a half she has regularly covered issues relating to manufacturing, small businesses, and the creative economy in the region. She is a 2007 RICJ Metcalf Award Winner for Diversity in the Media.
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