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Their hopes, their dreams on display

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Artists

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"Knowledge is now my lust," reads one of the lines.

"This shows where he wants to go and the struggle it takes to get there," MacNeil said. Gesturing toward the display, she added, "Obviously we're proud of them."

Most of these youngsters have had little or no experience with art. One of the youngsters was fascinated by a common type of marker, and took a few minutes to examine it.

The teachers encountered resistance initially and had to overcome a variety of obstacles. An idea "doesn't work as planned and requires a lot of trial and error but is a good life lesson," Popko said. "They get to express themselves through art and have a voice."

Money was not available, so the women made do with cheap materials, using cardboard torn from discarded boxes for one project. Because of security concerns, the youngsters were restricted in the tools they could use.

"You should have seen them — these big guys — sitting there with baby scissors, the little plastic ones with no points," Popko said, laughing as she recalled the struggle for creativity.

While most people wouldn't enjoy spending their working hours among young offenders, these women see opportunity. "It's a unique position to have. I feel pretty lucky," Popko said as she stood on a chair to adjust a piece in the show. Words on it proclaimed, "It's a beautiful life."



Above, AmeriCorps VISTA volunteers Marie Popko, left, and Meghan MacNeil display an exhibit by inmates at the state Training School, at the CityArts for Youth gallery in Providence. One piece shows a person with arms raised, with words expressing the past mistakes and future ambitions. At left, bottle caps and discarded items create a jazzy scene.

Story and photos by Andrew Dickerman
Journal Staff

SECTION C
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Their hopes, their dreams on display

PROVIDENCE — The brightly colored artwork on display at CityArts for Youth gallery on Broad Street comes from an unlikely source — young people incarcerated at the Rhode Island Training School.

The work was selected by Marie Popko and Meghan MacNeil, AmeriCorps VISTA volunteers who work 40 hours a week teaching art to the youngsters.

The two women are only slightly older than their students, but they have dedication and enthusiasm beyond their years and are effusive in praising their pupils.

The largest object in the show is a collage of bottle caps and discarded objects that have been transformed into a beautifully executed image with a Harlem jazz theme.

A torso with its arms raised is a meaningful work, especially because of the original poetry inscribed on it, echoing the mistakes and hopes of the artist.

"It's rising from violence, confusion, addiction," Popko said, explaining that the indecipherable words at the bottom become clearer as they reach the top.

The message is a carefully crafted statement by Greg A., describing a thirst for learning, with a picture attached that shows the artist from the neck down. None of the authors or artists is fully identified, but their intelligence and insight are visible.

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