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Youth art programs draw on AS220 grant

■ The \$260,000 grant will be used to expand more than a dozen state art programs and bring 20 VISTA participants to work on art projects for youth.

By MARION DAVIS
Journal Staff Writer

PROVIDENCE — For some, it's about developing young people's talents, allowing them to grow as artists, writers, performers. For others, it's just a good way to keep kids out of trouble and get them involved in something productive.

What matters, says Umberto Crenca, artistic director of AS220, is that the art programs offered by groups throughout Rhode Island

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help to bring people together and build communities.

Now, thanks to a \$260,000 grant from the federal Corporation for National Service, at least a dozen of those agencies will be able to expand their art offerings.

The grant, which was awarded to AS220, will bring 20 participants in the VISTA (Volunteers in Service to America) program to work on art programs for youth, Crenca said at a news conference at the downtown art center.

Many other VISTA members are already serving at nonprofits

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throughout the state, including AS220. With this grant, however, not only will the number of volunteers increase, but for the first time, those working on youth art programs will be linked together through AS220.

Lauren Brooke, who is coordinating the effort, said the goal is to develop "a good core of people" who can share ideas and resources, get trained together, and work jointly to promote the arts.

Brooke said at least a dozen community agencies will be served by the new volunteers. A few other VISTA members are already working at AS220, which has been involved with the Corporation for National Service since 1997.

AS220 reaches out to young people through its Muse Union, which has monthly open-stage nights to

showcase music, spoken word, dance and other performances by artists under 21 and monthly gallery shows. The Muse Union also publishes a 24-page magazine of art and creative writing.

In addition, AS220 works with inmates at the state Training School, and in January, it will begin offering an intensive arts-immersion program at the new Broad Street Community Studio for youngsters being released from the Training School.

The other agencies that are getting VISTA volunteers through the new initiative include the Mount Hope Community Center, which offers a variety of art classes, and Arts In The Square, in Olneyville, which has arts-based after-school and summer programs.

One volunteer will help the West Warwick police with their J.E.M.S. (Juveniles Evolving Through Meaningful Service) program, which gets first-time youthful offenders involved

in community service. Another VISTA member will serve as a mentor to students at the Met School, in Providence. Yet another will help Trinity Encore Inc., which is restoring the Trinity Square Theater to serve as a community arts center.

Other participating agencies include Youth In Action, the Capitol Region RSVP, Project New Urban Arts, the West Broadway Neighborhood Association, and the Rhode Island School of Design Museum.

"For some kids, exploring art is an end in itself. For others, these agencies' use of art will act as the youths' gateway into the other services that these agencies provide," Crenca said.

Either way, he added, the arts are "indispensable," because "art acts as the common ground where we can meet, helping to erode the barriers of age, class and race that keep youth from using the services these agencies provide."