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Arts, business merge for youth at Broad Street Studio

By Corinne Marceau
Contributing Writer

In 2001, Jason Magnan, now 19, went to the Broad Street Studio on a field trip from a group home. Other teens at the studio were on a stage bang­
ing on bongo drums, and Magnan soon found himself on the stage with them.

Today, Magnan is the manager of the Broad Street Orchestra, which has grown from a small group of eight people to an enterprise of approximately 15 people with a full-length CD in the works and revenue coming in.

At the Broad Street Studio, Magnan received training crucial to the business aspect of the orchestra. His skills include budgeting, business planning and customer relations.

"I learned everything I know about business here," he said.

The Broad Street Studio, located in Providence’s south side, is part of an alliance of Rhode Island nonprofit organizations formed by the Corporation for National Service and AS220 through the Statewide Arts Mission. SAM’s goal is to provide arts opportunities to all people.

The Broad Street Studio reaches out to young people in the community and offers them an environment for artistic expression as well as an opportunity to acquire valuable vocational skills.

Included in the Broad Street Studio’s many programs are five youth-run businesses. The businesses have two sides. Their main focus is to provide artistic opportunities to the youth (mostly teenagers) involved. The other side is entrepreneurial.

As they participate in the businesses, the teens learn skills such as budgeting and business planning. They attend weekly workshops where they learn skills involved in their businesses and work on jobs.

The teens draft their own business plans with assistance from training programs provided by organizations such as the Rhode Island MicroEnterprise Association and Bryant College.

Although run by the young artists, each business group has an adult leader or instructor to provide consistency and guidance. Scott Lapham, an adult instructor for the Photographic Memory business, says the program gives the teens “real on-the-job experience.

“We try to cultivate and expose youth to real-life skills and give them real-life experiences so they can comprehend what it is to be a professional,” said Lapham.

The five businesses encompass many different areas of the arts while operating in a business environment. The young musicians of the Broad Street Orchestra perform traditional and original songs at paid events around the Providence area at locations such as the Roger Williams Casino, the Federal Reserve and Rhode Island College.

Broad Street Visuals’ group of young graphic artists does graphic design for other nonprofit organizations and local businesses. They have designed ads to appear in newspapers as well as logo and flyer designs. Broad Street Visuals has also been commissioned to create murals – among them, one commissioned by Met Life and an anti-smoking mural commissioned by the Rhode Island Department of Health.

Photographic Memory creates high-quality black and white photographs. They do portrait and event photography as well as public relations photography for other nonprofit organizations.

Hip-Hop 220 is a performance group and hip-hop label that takes its show on the road throughout Rhode Island. The Broad Street Press publishes Muzine and the Hidden T.R.E.W.T.H., and sells advertising in the literary publications.

At least one-tenth of the businesses’ revenues go back into the administration of the Broad Street Studio and at least one-tenth must go back into the business. Through group discussion, the business as a whole then has the decision-making power. They can choose to pay themselves, buy supplies, invest more money in the business, etc. The
Studio targets local businesses

STUDIO from page 8

decision reached by the young artists and their adult supervisors should reflect their previously made business plan.

Approximately two-thirds of the Broad Street Studio's funding comes from the state. The remaining one-third comes from various sources. Although the studio works with community youth and does many projects in the community, there is little support from local businesses according to Sam Seidel, director of the youth program.

Much of the studio's business now comes from other nonprofit organizations but the studio is trying to focus on the grassroots aspect of the businesses.

Local businesses are a clientele they would love to see make use of their many services. Whether a business needs graphic design for an advertisement, a photographer for a function, or simply a mural to draw attention to their building, the young artists are anxious to help.

Magnan said: "Sometimes no one is willing to give us the time of day. It has gotten a little easier to book gigs, but it is still a little aggravating."

Seidel believes the Broad Street Studio provides valuable services to the community.

The art-based entrepreneurial programs train and prepare future employees and business leaders. In addition, the studio engages young people in positive activities, discouraging crime.

For example, the murals created by Broad Street Visuals not only beautify the neighborhood, but also decrease vandalism by giving young people another outlet for their artistic expression.

Art and business come together at the Broad Street Studio to create a setting where young people can express themselves artistically while also participating in a business environment and in the community.

As Seidel explained, "When people talk about the Providence renaissance, this is a part of it. We're helping to make the city an exciting, vital place."

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