

The art of volunteering



Nonprofit fosters connections between local artists and outreach organizations

Nicole Burke teaches digital photography to middle school students at the Jacob A. Riis Neighborhood Settlement House in Long Island City, Queens, through its partnership with the Artist Volunteer Center.

BY JORDAN GALLOWAY
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It's no secret that artists, to a certain extent, are used to working for free — they don't call them starving for nothing. However, these days, a new organization, the Artist Volunteer Center, is helping creative types provide free labor for good causes by developing and promoting arts programs.

Strengthening the bonds between artists and community outreach organizations looking to promote the arts is mutually beneficial, says the nonprofit's founder, Jason Maas.

"They're not connected, and we want to connect them," he says. "There are so many organizations working independently of one another, with similar missions of promoting arts and helping people, that could benefit from working together. We seek to connect the talent and the infrastructure that already exists in New York."

Maas, an artist himself, says the flooding of his studio in Red Hook, Brooklyn, during Hurricane Sandy led him to volunteer work, first as a disaster relief worker and later as a coordinator. He spent the weeks and months after the storm working

for local nonprofits removing mold and debris from affected areas like the Rockaways.

When he finally got back to making art, Maas says, he found his new work was so heavily influenced by his time spent volunteering that he wanted to find a way to offer other artists a similar opportunity to engage with the outside world in a socially conscious way.

He left his job in July to start the Artist Volunteer Center and officially launched the organization in October.

"I realized that artists need to be given the chance to be able to step outside of their studio, to step away from the Internet and actually get their hands dirty and get involved in their community," Maas says. "I came up with the organization as a way to make it easier for artists to do that."

The Hundred Hour AV Challenge is the first program Maas rolled out.

It encourages artist to complete 100 hours of community service in six months by partnering with local outreach organizations like New York Cares, Big Brothers Big Sisters and the city Parks Department.

Maas says the mission of the program is to get artists to develop a consistent relationship with

their community and the volunteer projects that they serve.

"Overall, we have had a promising start with artists signing up," he says.

"I am currently reaching out to the local arts schools so that we can broaden our group. Our intent is to help connect city college students with volunteer opportunities, and in turn work with the schools to provide the students with art shows either on- or off-campus."

Nicole Burke is a sophomore at New York University who runs a digital photo workshop for middle school students at the Jacob A. Riis Neighborhood Settlement House, a community outreach organization in Long Island City, Queens. Already a photographer and an avid volunteer before she met Maas, Burke says it wasn't until getting involved with the Artist Volunteer Center that the two worlds intertwined.

"I believe photography and social change complement one another," Burke says. "The (volunteer center) is unique because it is tapping into an unused resource: the artist and the volunteer. Maas has now become my mentor."

Burke teaches the art of photography to a generation of kids growing up filtering photos on

Instagram, a far cry from the darkrooms where she learned to develop film. Despite the difference, Burke says, she does her best to incorporate new technology into her lessons and encourages her students to find their artistic expression, even through a smartphone app.

"I use these tools as a foundation for each lesson to help the kids see that photography begins with understanding the person behind the lens," she says. "I want them to understand why they pick certain angles and filters to present their images. I want them to understand that even in this world of millions of photographers, what they produce has the potential to change the world."

Burke's workshop is one of several art programs Riis Settlement provides its local community. Christopher Hanway, Riis executive director, says the visual and performing arts have always been a cornerstone of its programming.

"The arts help people of all ages and backgrounds reach their full potential by allowing them new avenues for creativity and self-expression," he says. "When the opportunity to partner with (the Artist Volunteer Center) presented itself, it

was an easy call. A partnership that could strengthen and deepen our arts programs and better serve our communities, while helping professional artists find new ways to give back, is almost a no-brainer. And so far, in its early stages, it is working out incredibly."

Hanway considers Burke's digital photography project a success, and is working with Maas to develop additional programming, including dance and ceramics. Hanway feels he's found a dedicated and driven collaborator in Maas, who he says has an ability to move a project forward.

Maas, for his part, is more humble in his self-evaluation, reflecting not on how much he's managed to accomplish in such a small amount of time, but on the intrinsic value of volunteering itself.

"I feel like volunteering is one of the most important activities that we can partake in as human beings," he says, "and who better than artists to partake in those kind of activities because they have the ability to share their experience."

For more information on the Artist Volunteer Center, visit avcenter.org.

jgalloway@nydailynews.com