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Venice Arts: In Neighborhoods

Venice Arts: In Neighborhoods started in 1993 as a grassroots volunteer based arts organization set up to introduce the Venice's lower income kids to art. In 1996, the organization settled its focus on media arts and since then has experienced a growth explosion. Now serving approximately 3200 people a year, this community-based youth arts organization is an art and media learning hub where people from diverse communities can find their creative voice, broaden their knowledge, and develop their skills. Serving people of all ages, living in low-income or underrepresented communities, Venice Arts uses art mentoring to prevent youth involvement in high-risk activities. By serving lower income minorities living within Venice, Venice Arts' programs reach people, specifically kids, who otherwise not have any structured-arts education or exposure. Without this exposure, these already at-risk kids would be placed at an even greater disadvantage as it has been repeatedly shown that arts education builds student confidence, achievement levels and overall academic success.

As technology continually evolves, Venice Arts is at the forefront of the technological shift, which it has termed "Field Participant Produced" media. "Participant produced" media allows people to tell their own stories through the use of media technology. To complement and extend its work, Venice Arts is collaborating with the University of Southern California (USC) to develop an art minor in "Field Participant Production" and to establish the "Institute of Photographic Empowerment." This new partnership, paired with these new developments, will increase leadership and visibility in "participant produced" documentary work.

Venice Arts offers media arts education workshops to ages six to adult. Six to nine year olds can participate in *Art Discovery*, which explores painting, drawing, collage, sculpture and more. For ten to eighteen year olds, workshops are offered in photography, digital arts, and media arts. Adult workshops complement the youth programs in photography, film, and digital arts.

The youth photography workshops are Venice Arts' strongest core programs. Here kids are taught how to shoot with professional 35mm and digital cameras, how to print in a darkroom, use PhotoShop, and how to make photographic art. Advanced students may also work with professionals on client projects through Venice Arts' *Photo Opportunities program*. In the youth digital arts program students create comic books, design posters, draw, paint and more, while learning about art, design and developing skills. In advanced classes, students create their own web site or motion-based art using the latest multi-media software. The media arts workshops for youth teach students how to use digital cameras, develop scripts, edit and create music to make personal documentaries and learn about digital storytelling. In advanced programs, students create more complex projects to further develop their filmmaking skills.

If youth students are committed to growing as an artist, they can apply to become a Youth Art Mentor or join Venice Arts' *Advanced Studies* program. This program targets a small group of talented and motivated youth who have been involved at Venice Arts for a number of years and have developed the creative and technical skills and knowledge necessary to begin semi-independent work on projects. Most *Advanced Studies* students work on filling gaps in knowledge and skill, expanding their ability to take an idea from concept through execution,

Despite the economic recession, Venice Arts' programs remain popular. Workshops, gallery and even participation have increased, however this has not helped the organization weather the economic storm hovering over California, since most programming is offered for free or at low cost. In January 2009 Venice Arts was forced to cut costs, which required the elimination of its Gallery and Exhibits Manager position. Once the position was terminated, a burden was placed upon the entire organization, specifically the staff. Forced to cover the responsibilities of the Gallery and Exhibits Manager, staff were pulled from their regular job duties, which hindered the organization's ability to function efficiently. It became apparent that Venice Arts would have to find funding for this position or face the possibility of closing its gallery to the public - a closure that would have had a detrimental impact on the organization and the community. Since the gallery is Venice Arts' representative force, reducing community visibility would have further decreased its ability to bring in adequate funds, thus crippling the organizations ability to serve its public. To solve this problem, Venice Arts sought a onetime Recovery Act grant from the California Arts Council. This funding allowed the organization to promote, existing employee, Elysa Voshell to the position of Gallery and Exhibits Manager. With the position filled, staff was able to return to their regular duties and the organization was equipped to maintain and forward gallery exhibitions.

As the Gallery and Exhibits Manager, Ms. Voshell manages the arts gallery, including maintaining the gallery archive, managing the installations, developing the exhibits schedule of both stationary and touring exhibits, and developing and managing the organization's public programs in conjunction with the gallery exhibits.

With an existing passion for the arts since childhood, Ms. Voshell followed the path of creativity into college, with her recent completion of a second Masters Degree in visual and curatorial studies from the University of Pennsylvania. Like her educational ambition, Ms. Voshell's work experience is impressive. She quickly immersed herself in the field of arts work as a Staff Writer for the University of Contemporary Art in Philadelphia, an Associate Editor at the Philadelphia Museum of Art, an artists' assistant and a non-profit art instructor. This previous work experience prepared Ms. Voshell to take on the challenges of working for a non-profit arts organization during an economically uncertain climate.

Ms. Voshell's passion for the arts, however has helped sustain and grow the quality and impact of Venice Arts' gallery, touring exhibitions and related public programs, lectures and presentations. She has been able to work to advance the organization's strategic goal of being a leader in the field of "participant-produced" documentary work while broadening the organization's engagement with the local community through exhibitions and programs, which are vital to the organization's underlying mission.

Venice Arts' awards and commendations include a 2009 Humanities Prize from Philanthropic Partners to Venice Arts, 2008 Certificate of Achievement from Mayor Villaraigosa and the City of Los Angeles for 15 years of accomplishments and achievements, 2008 Certificate of Recognition from Councilmember Bill Rosendahl for leadership and service to the community for over 15 years, 2008 Certificate of Appreciation from the California State Assembly for outstanding efforts in community partnership development in the "Picture This!" youth photography program, 2007

and on creating a portfolio in preparation for advanced learning or work. *Advanced Studies* program includes components in advanced workshops, exhibition, youth art internships, media district internships, special projects and independent learning.

Venice Arts' Workshops for Adults are scheduled to accommodate working adults. Examples of adult workshops include: the *Digital Darkroom*, are hands-on workshops for those interested in learning the basics of PhotoShop or processing, and for those interested in making exhibit-quality prints; *Developing Your Documentary*, a photography course which helps students take their documentary project to the next level; and *Quick Web Site and Gallery Building for Photographers* is designed to get students working to create their own photographer's website and gallery.

In an effort to make its programs more accessible, Venice Arts' *Art Partners* program brings art mentoring and special projects to places where young people dwell. This travelling program expands student and audience services to communities outside of Venice. Communities previously serviced by this program, include among others, Mar Vista Gardens, a housing project located in southwestern LA; St. Francis Center located in downtown LA; the County of LA's Watts/Willowbrook Boys and Girls Club; and Olympic High School in Santa Monica.

All Venice Arts programs ignite imagination, mentor creativity, and expand possibilities for participants to create and share personal and community stories. Venice Arts' programs not only build a strong sense of community for participating students, but they increase youth participants' self-esteem and efficacy. In addition to media arts educational opportunities, each year Venice Arts also hosts at its gallery several exhibits of student photography. Venice Arts Gallery features innovative work by young and emerging artists, documentary and "participant-produced" photography, and the work of professional artists. The gallery helps cultivate passion for media arts for the community at large, and affords the opportunity for students to display their work, which increases student confidence, and offers them exposure and recognition within the community.

Commendation from Debra Bowen, Secretary of State of California, for Venice Arts' volunteer efforts on the occasion of the 10th Anniversary of the Vera Davis McClendon Youth and Family Center, 2003 Certificate of Recognition from California State Assembly, 2001 California Arts Council Exemplary Arts Organization designation, as well as various others.

Venice Arts receives funding from the National Endowment for the Arts, the National Arts and Disability Center, the California Arts Council, the Los Angeles County Arts Commission, the City of Los Angeles Department of Cultural Affairs, the James Irvine Foundation, the Sony Corporation, and numerous others.

--Information for this story is based on an interview between Darrie Malle-Cutler and Venice Arts: In Neighborhoods, the organization's Recovery Act application and Website pages. Story Written by Darrie Malle-Cutler