Introduction / Mission

As a means to help prevent youth induced violence in Boston, the non-profit arts organization, Artists for Humanity, gives teens 14-18 the opportunity to not only explore and expand their artistic talents, but to be paid for their apprenticeships. By building a ‘safe space’ for urban youth and engaging them in into an arts-based community, these participants are provided a hands-on experience, as well as the support, mentorship, and positive reinforcement necessary to build a brighter future.

According to the website, “AFH’s mission is to bridge economic, racial and social divisions by providing under-resourced urban youth with the keys to self-sufficiency through paid employment in art and design” (“Artists for Humanity”, n.d.). Moreover, it provides these teens the space and tools needed to help them develop their passions, skills, and entrepreneurship. In promotion of strengthening resilience, AFH builds upon the interests and needs of the participants in pursuit of social transformation. With Arts programs being cut in public schools across the board, AFH gives enrolled students the opportunity to receive credit for integrated arts education in participating schools, with the focus on painting, 3D design, video, graphic design, and photography, showing an 89% increase of participating youth reporting improved artistic skills, as well as learning responsibility, patience, and integral communication skills.
History

AFH was initiated as a way to address the lack of arts programs and budget cuts in the Boston Public School system. Almost 25 years ago, Susan Rodgerson began pitching her idea to public schools in the greater Boston area. Rodgerson wished to collaborate with teens in creating large art pieces to sell to businesses. With fundraising experience, contributions, and the willingness of a school and six initial participants, her project proved a success, and soon, Rodgerson was able to expand from a 500 square foot space in South End to a 10,000 square foot space on A Street in Fort Point. In 2000, AFH once again reached maximum capacity, and by 2004, had finally moved to the Epicenter, a 24,000 square foot space where over 250+ teens are employed annually for their programs. It was also the first project in Boston to earn a LEEDS (Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design) Platinum Certification from the U.S. Green Building Council.

Ongoing Projects

- AFH currently has 67 exhibitions and public art installations and 723 commissioned client projects

- **PAID APPRENTICESHIPS:** AFH is currently employing 274 urban youth to develop skill and produce artworks in their graphic studio design, video and motion studio, photography lab, 3D design studios, painting studios, and screen printing studios.

- **AFH INTERACTIVE:** Is a creative service offered by AFH bringing youth participants, mentors, and other members of the community together to provide collaboration, discussions, and rich engagement for interactive sessions and community building.
• **STEM:** Mentorship and academic assistance for participating teens in Science, Technology, Engineering, and Math for college readiness.

• **INWARD BOUND:** This program allows teen participants to take a leadership role in teaching incoming adults.
PHOTOS/ ARTISTS FOR HUMANITY (AFH)

Painting Studio

Photography Studio teens learned about fast shutter speeds the AFH way… by throwing water-balloons and buckets of water at their mentor, Mary Nguyen!
Artists at work
Voice, Vision, Virtuosity - lovely opening reception for the new exhibition at 35 Channel Center.
Sculpture studio
The AFH programs are a combination of entrepreneurship, business training and art making.

Teens in AFH don’t just learn valuable skills, they innovate and create fine arts for diverse range of clients. AFH uses creativity and design as a tool for social change. Through their programs they empower youth (who are from low- and very-low income diverse families) with new skills. These skills provide them with new opportunities to learn and conduct business in the innovation economy. By giving them a job, AFH decreases and counteracts the risks facing young people. Teens will be enriched by art and cultural experiences, they learn to be innovative in an artistic way. It increases self confidence and self awareness of the teens which contribute in prevention of violence and its manifestations. AFH gives them a safe space to go with their peers after school to learn and participate in a safe social interaction. The group working and mentorship program help them to learn the culture of respect, productivity as well as life skills.
Analysis of Strengths

Currently, 53% of AFH’s participants live in the most ‘at risk’ Boston communities. Despite these stats, AFH has a success rate of 100% graduating students and 100% students accepted into a post-secondary or vocational training school. These numbers represent how dedication and investment in Boston’s youth can excel their growth, build resilience, and help prevent youth violence.

In addition, ongoing programs have become a model for other states and cities in Massachusetts including Woonsocket, RI (RiverzEdge Arts Project); Kansas City, KS (MyArts); North Little Rock, AR (The Art Connection); New Orleans, LA (Youth Creative Agency) and Framingham, MA (The TEMPO program at Wayside Youth Services). This program model indicates a successful method for assisting in indirect violence prevention and a proven method of sustainability with great capacity.

Another strength of AFH is the move to the Epicenter in 2004, making AFH one of the largest employers of teens in Boston. Since the space has more than doubled, youth employment has raised from 100 to 250 annually and contribution have tripled from $790k in 2004 to $2,028,000 in 2014. According to their website, events bring in $600k+ annually in revenue. AFH also has support from Pinnacle Leadership Institute and Grand Circle Foundation (“Susan Rodgerson”, n.d.). Due to a confidentiality notice, no other information is provided on their website in terms of donors in order to protect their privacy.

Analysis of Challenges

Despite such exponential growth, AFH has reached their capacity at the Epicenter. They currently have a waitlist of over 150 youth from at-risk communities who are unable to
participate in the program due to space and resource limitations. When Richard Frank, Marketing Director of AFH, was asked what the biggest challenges were, he stated, “Fundraising, always trying to raise more money to serve the young.” In this case, more funds would be needed in order to build capacity for the growing number of interested youth, and with that more mentors and more staff.

Next Steps

According to an article written on Susan Rodgerson by Grand Circle Foundation, Rodgerson plans to relocate to a 75,000 square foot facility from the current 24,000 facility in order to provide more opportunities to under-resourced youth and continue to expand the organization, keeping true to their vision. In addition, Rodgerson wishes to add a store, cafe, gallery, with manufacturing capabilities, stating, “I want it to be a destination that builds membership, with a gallery for youth-created art that gives youth from around the world a united voice” (“Susan Rodgerson”, n.d.).

Team reflection and analysis on the process:

Despite our interests and attempts to have a personal interview with a member of AFH, we found that they were, unfortunately, unable to cooperate per our request. First, we reached out to the Director of Program Operations, Lorraine Johnson, by email and requested an appointment for an interview and tour with no success. We sent several emails and answered the questions that the organization had regarding the purpose of our project in a timely fashion. To make the process easier for them, we suggested a written reply to our questions to make it more efficient.
However, after all of the correspondence, we were told that “...to be frank, we just don't have the capacity to participate in your worthy initiative at this time. We have so much going on with our program and projects, our upcoming 'Greatest Party on Earth' 25-Year Celebration that happens on April 30th, that includes a publication of our own! and our expansion efforts - that we just can't do it justice” (Johnson, 2016).

Nevertheless, we decided to try once again through telephone. Linda was able to reach Richard Frank, the Marketing Director of the organization. Unfortunately, Frank was in a hurry, rushing the interview process and passing over many of the questions. The answers in which he did provide were no different from the generic information found on the website. In addition, he suggested that Linda review the website for answers.

In this experience, we learned that the organization could not assist us with our project due to busy schedules and lack of staff- precisely a Communications Director, which Linda argues they are in dire need of. With their exponential growth and increasing interest and attention from the Boston community, it would only benefit the organization and improve communications and relationships if they are to hire a Communications Director. In order to do so, it would thus require the organization to pay for an extra staff member, when fundraising, according to Frank, is already a significant challenge. But despite the costs, it is essential for the organization to be more open and welcoming to public inquiry and those who are interested in learning more about it. A Communications Director would be able to allocate and dedicate time and communicate respectfully with others not directly involved in the program. According to Frank, AFH is “Always striving to get better, ... resources, new ideas, all those things.. More collaborations with private and businesses we serve. New and valuable collaboration with
clients” (2016). Thus, it is our suggestion that new strategies for effective communication be implemented for the improvement of this organization, which will, in effect, increase capacity and serve as a model in all aspects.

References


