

The Art of Change

A forward-thinking youth program at The Warhol gives local teens a voice through art.

By Mark Kramer

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- Mary Tremonte, The Warhol’s Youth Programs coordinator



On a muggy July afternoon in Market Square, Marritta Gillcrease, a Perry High School junior clad in an orange t-shirt and jeans, watches a woman squeegee dollops of blue and silver paint across a silkscreen print. It doesn’t look all that radical, but what this duo is up to is all about speaking up, and out, through art.

Gillcrease is a member of The Warhol’s Radical Urban Silkscreen Team (RUST), and she’s demonstrating to this enthusiastic passerby the art of silkscreening, a technique made hugely popular by Andy Warhol. Together, they’re silkscreening an image onto a poster that Gillcrease helped design for this very occasion: a peace rally organized, in part, by Teens Against Senseless Violence (TASK).

“Violence is not only a problem in our communities but also in schools, high school especially,” says Gillcrease. “Violence in Pittsburgh is claiming the lives of young people at alarming rates and some serious actions need to be taken.”

For this crowd, poetry, dance, and visual art are part of those serious actions.

RUST is a summer program launched last year by The Warhol in partnership with Justseeds Artist Cooperative and the local artist-run fine art printmaking shop, Artists Image Resource. The goal: to recruit a diverse mix of area teenagers, tapping into groups such as the North Side’s Young Men and Women’s African Heritage Association, to teach them the low-cost skill of printmaking and how to use

the medium as a positive agent of change in their communities.

Over the past two summers, for four or five days a week, five hours a day over two months, a small crop of students have come together to talk about issues that concern them—from making local produce more readily available to the public to discrimination and teen violence. They then research their topics, come up with a communications strategy, and create print materials for themselves, and in support of grassroots groups with a like-minded social agenda.

“The empowerment of this program has a lot to do with gaining technical expertise in this new-to-most-of-them medium, which has so many applications and uses,” says Mary Tremonte, The Warhol’s youth programs coordinator. “Then, they’re empowered to choose issues that are important to them and identify what it takes to change a situation.”

From inside the program’s temporary storefront studio on East Ohio Street on the city’s North Side, Clayton Bonner, a senior at Pittsburgh High School for the Creative and Performing Arts (CAPA), creates a playful, four-color image titled, *Where’s Your Beef?* The poster shows a farmer standing next to a deformed cow that’s comprised of parts from other animals, including a chicken’s beak and comb.

Bonner, who’s considering a career in illustration, says he’s alarmed by how much the food we eat has been genetically modified and mixed with other organisms. “It really doesn’t even seem like normal, healthy meat anymore,” he says.

As a group, Bonner and his five RUST peers, most of whom live on Pittsburgh’s North Side, supported three local events this past summer that promote healthy choices, including the North Side Farmers Market and a Kayak Pittsburgh demonstration at Lake Elizabeth in Allegheny Commons on the North Shore. Using their newly honed marketing and printmaking skills, the teens designed promotional materials for the groups to use to get the word out, and then manned mobile art-making stations during the events, giving visitors the chance to learn about silkscreening and make their own socially-conscious prints to take home. Each Friday at the Farmers Market, for example, the teens showed shoppers just how easy and fun such art-making can be by scanning a piece of fruit to use, perhaps, as cover art for a recyclable shopping bag.

But it was the July peace rally, sponsored by the MGR Foundation, a non-profit organization committed to overcoming social and economic barriers, that allowed the RUST teens to collaborate with their activist-minded peers at TASK. Together they designed posters and t-shirts to distribute at the rally.

“We achieved our goal of providing students an opportunity to have their voices heard,” says Phil Koch, the MRG Foundation’s director of Pittsburgh programming. Just as important, he added, was the peer education process, through which RUST and TASK students learned from one another and worked towards a common goal.

Says Marritta Gillcrease: “The rally proves that people from various neighborhoods can come together without tension and without problems and do something positive and enjoyable.”

For her part, Gillcrease, who also writes poetry and plays the saxophone, plans on incorporating her newly learned skills into an upcoming project at her high school. She wants to create a children's book that incorporates flashcards made from silkscreen prints.

"I'm interested in being a mentor now more than ever," she says, "and I'm excited about helping somebody younger make positive choices."
