

From Murals to Music, N.J. Neighborhoods Are Alive With Creativity

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New Jersey's established arts organizations may attract the biggest crowds and the largest grants, but in towns and neighborhoods around the state, small arts groups and individual artists are working under the radar, and often on tiny budgets, to transform neighborhoods, engage children and build community pride, one block at a time.

Their work is varied — they paint murals in Trenton, commission public sculptures in New Brunswick, perform free concerts in Woodbridge. But they share a common goal: To remove the "special occasion" status from art and make music, painting and poetry a part of everyday life.

"How do we think about arts?" asked artist Lorena La Grassa, who runs ValleyArts, a community-based organization in West Orange/Orange. "It's more than pretty pictures on the wall. It's people working with their hands."

Arts as action is the philosophy behind the arts district transforming the industrial neighborhood where Orange and West Orange meet into a hip, thriving enclave. ValleyArts is the vision of HANDS Inc., a nonprofit redevelopment corporation.

In just a few years, the district of abandoned hat factories and other industrial buildings has become home to a professional theater — the much-honored Luna Stage — dozens of art studios and galleries, including Oualie Art and IronWorks Gallery, and an award-winning restaurant, Hat City Kitchen.

The key to the district's success is two-fold. It interprets "arts" in its most broad sense, so the chefs working in Hat City are culinary artists, and the kids in the after-school classes at Orng Ink are emerging artists, La Grassa says.

Even more important, these artists are involved in every aspect of the district's operations, La Grassa says.

"Artists are the motor, the way they embrace the programs, mostly on a volunteer basis. It's the energy they bring — we always want to spotlight them," La Grassa said.

Collaboration is another critical piece of the ValleyArts puzzle, she said. District leaders seek the opinions of business owners and residents, as well as those of the artists and students they house and teach.

The results are as amazing as they are beautiful. From the funky architecture of Luna Stage's new facility to the eye-popping murals that grace many buildings, artistic expression is everywhere.

Donations, however, are scarce.

"It's a financial struggle for everybody," La Grassa said. "The only way to float, to stay alive, is to hold each other's hands."

'UNDERSERVED' VENUES

The lack of funds for grassroots efforts like ValleyArts was the focus of a 2011 study by the watchdog National Committee for Responsive Philanthropy. The report showed a majority of the dollars distributed by private foundations goes to old and big organizations that present Western European art forms, while only 10 percent supports community-based groups dedicated to "underserved" populations.

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