

Oakley studio, retail space allows artists with disabilities to connect with community



Julia Lipovsky, Visionarium manager, works with students in a class.
DAVID KALONICK

By Maya Drozd – Courier Contributor
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When Visionaries + Voices started about 15 years ago, its primary focus was providing studio space and exhibition opportunities for artists with disabilities. The nonprofit's mission has since broadened to include professional development. One component of that is the six-year-old Teaching Artist Program, which pairs an artist with a mentor to learn about public speaking, lesson plan development and other essential skills through a 30-week course. After completion, artists are ready to earn income by teaching ceramics, drawing, soft sculpture, and painting in community and classroom settings. The program now has 28 alumni and reaches more than 6,000 students each year.

V+V education director Marion Cosgrove Rauch said the program not only benefits the artist but helps change attitudes. "The message that's being given to the students is that this person is not defined by a disability," Rauch said. "This person can be a leader in the community." Braxton Thomas, who completed the program, now teaches at art at Riverside East Academy, a Cincinnati Public pre-K through 12th-grade school in the East End. "It's a wonderful experience to teach kids art," Thomas said. "I've gotten better. The kids like the assignments more. They have more fun. That's a great measure of success."

V+V, which operates studios in Northside and Springdale, extended that between artists and the community even further last fall when it opened the Visionarium on Oakley Square. Located at 3054 Madison Road in the space that was formerly Blue Manatee Bookstore, the combined learning studio and retail shop provides artist-led workshops and events for all ages and abilities, as well as original artwork for sale. "We wanted to have classes where the teaching artists have more control over the environment," said Visionarium manager Julia Lipovsky. "In the Visionarium, people enter our world, and the artists get more practice teaching."



Karen Boyhen is the creative director of Visionaries + Voices.
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Beyond the sales of original works, V+V creative director Karen Boyhen works with artists to develop products using their artwork, including books, T-shirts, greeting cards, mugs, wrapping paper and jewelry. Participants are paid royalties above the industry standard, with V+V handling all production costs. This product program creates a revenue stream for artists "who don't make 'artwork' in the traditional sense that you would show or purchase in a gallery," Lipovsky said.

In addition to building a fulfillment area in the back of the studio and adding more products to the online shop, the staff is looking to build more wholesale relationships. Currently, select products are for sale in the Contemporary Arts Center's gift shop downtown and at the ART Gallery in Wyoming. Lipovsky said she is continuing to expand programming as she gets a sense of what the community wants. "I'm really excited about the duality of this space: the work space and the retail operation."

ABOUT VISIONARIES + VOICES

Visionaries + Voices is a 501(c)3 nonprofit that provides a creative outlet to people with disabilities. It serves more than 150 artists in three locations: Northside, which holds communal studio space for members, administrative offices and a gallery; Tri-County, which focuses on studio space with a small retail shop; and the new Visionarium, a storefront and flexible studio space in the heart of the Oakley business district. The nonprofit receives major funding from Hamilton County and Butler County Developmental Disabilities Services, in addition to other sources.

MURAL DEDICATION

The nonprofit public art organization ArtWorks has just completed a mural on the side of the Visionarium's building, based on artwork by V+V member Michael Bartels. The project was led by a professional artist assisted by teen apprentices and four V+V artists, providing participants yet another professional development experience. The mural dedication will take place at 3054 Madison Road at 5:30-7 p.m. Sept. 5.