ArtReach: Enriching Lives, Revitalizing a Community

UAB Donors Support Outreach Program

One of ArtPlay's newest endeavors, ArtReach, is bringing dance, music, theater, and the visual arts to the Woodlawn YWCA (YWoodlawn) Initiative. Begun with seed money from the Mike and Gillian Goodrich Foundation, ArtReach provides high-quality arts programming for the residents of YWoodlawn through a series of classes and programs benefiting children and adults. The program, started in January 2012, enriches lives and fills YWoodlawn residents with a new and exciting enthusiasm for the arts.

ArtReach is a collaborative venture between UAB's Alys Robinson Stephens Performing Arts Center's (ASC) ArtPlay and the YWCA of Central Alabama at YWoodlawn. Through this program, ArtPlay's teaching artists offer free instruction to children as young as three as well as adults in subjects ranging from quilting and drumming to jazz and African dance.

The project contributes to the revitalization of Birmingham's Woodlawn area, where the YWCA has invested $11 million for a housing initiative. “We’re taking a holistic approach to community development,” says Sally Mackin, executive director of the Woodlawn Foundation. (The foundation is the coordinating agency for Woodlawn United, a partnership dedicated to holistic revitalization of the Woodlawn community.)

“That means working with programs that offer educational opportunities for our neighbors in all areas of life, from college and career readiness to arts and culture. ArtReach is a great example of a program that supports Woodlawn residents on all of those levels.”

ArtReach also fits ArtPlay's goals, which were established after Jane Stephens Comer, the daughter of Alys and Elton B. Stephens, donated $5 million to the ASC's arts education program. In addition to the Goodriches, other sponsors for ArtReach are the Community
“ArtReach has brought a joyful sense of community to the residents of the Woodlawn area who participate in its programs,” Gillian Goodrich says. “At last year’s summer celebration, you could see the enthusiastic participation of the children in drumming, dance, and music.”

School children from all over the area already benefit from ArtPlay with the Make It Happen Performing Ensemble and Meet the Artist school shows. ArtPlay classes include ballet, modern, jazz and hip-hop dance; bookbinding; drama; drawing; fabric arts; improv and stand-up comedy; music; musical theater; painting; storytelling; visual arts; and more. Private instruction also is available. ArtReach is broadening the scope of these opportunities to include more children throughout the community.

ASC Corporate Board Chair Theresa Bruno has been involved with YWoodlawn for many years and is excited about the possibilities that are growing from this partnership. “From the very beginning, before the gift was made, Jane [Comer] wanted this to reach beyond the walls of ArtPlay,” Bruno says. “This is a model for what could go to other organizations that need arts programming.” She hopes ArtReach will be as successful as ArtPlay, where enrollment increased from 135 to 170 in more than three dozen classes during its second semester of operation.

“ArtReach has afforded opportunities to the youth and adults we serve in Woodlawn to express themselves through the arts and equip them with new skills in ways previously unavailable,” says Suzanne Durham, CEO of the YWCA of Central Alabama. “Whether it’s learning to play guitar one-on-one with an instructor, quilting with a
A group of new friends, painting and sculpting, or studying ballet, ArtReach has truly enlivened the promise of musicians, artisans, and dancers among us all in Woodlawn. We are so appreciative of all who make this possible.”

Reaching out to All Age Groups

Children aren’t the only ones benefiting from programs like ArtReach. Residents of Birmingham-area independent- and assisted-living facilities began enjoying the rewards and sustaining effects of art last year when, through a partnership with Protective Life Corporation, UAB’s ArtPlay launched ArtCare. This program develops arts classes and programs specifically designed to engage older adults in health improvement and life-enhancing activities through the arts. Programs include art, music, and movement classes, as well as theater with The Seasoned Performers, a nonprofit company that offers opportunities for participation in theater to senior adults.

Research shows that regular participation in arts programs helps minimize age-related physical and cognitive impairments and contributes to better physical, intellectual, and emotional health. ArtCare is currently in seven different independent- and assisted-living facilities and is bringing out the kid in everyone.