

From murals to music, N.J. neighborhoods are alive with creativity

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By **Peggy McGlone/The Star-Ledger**

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.



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Mike Malbrough, left, the Director of Orng Ink, the youth studio at IronWorks Gallery, paints as Houston Clerizier, 18, Jermaine Sutherland, 19, and Patricia Rogers, 21, work on their art projects. Photos of the after-school art making program with artist in residence at IronWorks Gallery in the ValleyArts district.



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A painted mural on Tompkins St. across from the IronWorks Gallery. Photos of the after-school art making program with artist in residence at IronWorks Gallery in the ValleyArts district.

"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.

Despite the imbalance, many local efforts are thriving. In South Orange, municipal leaders funded a local art gallery and performance center, and then backed the effort that led to the South Orange Performing Arts Center. In Woodbridge, municipal support is critical to the Baron Arts Center, which hosts art shows and a long-standing PoetsWednesday series, one of the oldest poetry groups in the country.

The Baron's galleries and its 100-seat performance space are open to community members and professionals alike, according to Cynthia Knight, who runs the center. The staff present exhibitions and concerts and outdoor events in the summer. Each year they bring about 50,000 to the town to events that are all free.

Knight's efforts help spark the Woodbridge Art Collective and Music on Main, a concert series that brings top-shelf singer-songwriters to town. She is committed to embracing all types of communities, from senior citizens to specific ethnic groups and family audiences. Her programs are funded by the township, but she relies on community volunteers to keep them running.

"It's their passion," she said. "It's incredible and it's always been that way."

The arts began transforming New Brunswick several decades ago. The Middlesex County city has two professional theaters, the George Street Playhouse and Crossroads, in addition to the restored State Theatre, the Zimmerli Art Museum and several other Rutgers arts initiatives, and they work closely with businesses, especially restaurants, to market their events.

ART IN THE STREETS

The latest initiative takes art to the streets by commissioning public art to illuminate the city's rich history.



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A mural on a building located on South Jefferson St. near the IronWorks Gallery. Photos of the after-school art making program with artist in residence at IronWorks Gallery in the ValleyArts district.

Organizer Pam Stefanek said the committee will erect its first commission — a life-size sculpture depicting Col. John Neilson standing on top of a table for the third reading of the Declaration of Independence — at Neilson and Albany streets. Future commissions might honor the late actor/activist Paul Robeson, or feature an immigration theme, and the long-range plan includes contemporary art, perhaps 3-D imagery on a sidewalk or building, Stefanek said.



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Mike Malbrough, right, the Director of Orng Ink, the youth studio at IronWorks, gives feedback to Felgar Mesa, 12, on his painting.

"We're taking baby steps," she said, noting the site for the first commission has been secured and two-thirds of the estimated \$150,000 cost has been raised.

Artworks in Trenton recently refocused its efforts on community engagement in the state's capital city, said new executive director Lynn Lemrye. Located on Stockton Street in the city's Mill Hill District, Artworks encourages participation from the community while also celebrating high quality.

The group's professional galleries are open to beginner and weekend artists, and the organization even encourages would-be curators to propose exhibitions for the space.

Its signature event, Art All Night, is a 24-hour visual and performance art showcase that features the work of amateurs and professionals, all treated with the same respect. The next one will be June 16-17.

Lemrye said the show is not juried, so any work that is submitted is exhibited. A piece of refrigerator art from a budding painter will be hung with the same care as the painting submitted by a professional, she said.

"It's very democratic," she said. "Beyond democratic."

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