

## **Greenwich Alliance for Education and the Developing Artist Program (article in Old Greenwich & Riverside Neighbors Magazine April 2021 Issue)**

*By Kimberly Lee / Photos by Heike Coffee Photography and submitted by The Developing Artist Program*



Living in Old Greenwich and Riverside has many wonderful advantages. For example, our neighbors and friends work well together to help the community be better. Programs that help students and schools are imagined and executed. We are not a “what a great idea – oh well” community. We are a “great idea – let’s do it!” community. The Developing Artist grant at Eastern Middle School in Riverside is one inspirational example of this mindset at work. The Developing Artist program even leads with words that mirror this approach; **Think It – Do It – Make It.**

Like all successful collaborations, The Developing Artist has many people working hard to make it happen. The people involved include the EMS teachers Stacy Cleary and Ben Quesnel, who is also a program coordinator and studio artist. They work with studio artist educator and program coordinator Michael Manning and leaders at the Greenwich Alliance for Education including Julie Faryniarz and Stacy Loveless.

### **BACKGROUND**

Julie and her husband Danny live in Old Greenwich. The couple has three children. Andrew, Kate, and Robbie who all went through Greenwich public schools. They moved here in 1998 shortly before Andrew began at Riverside School. Julie is an energetic woman who loves living in the area and wanted to find a way to get involved. She served as Riverside School PTA President, then in 2009 she joined the Greenwich Alliance for Education as Executive Director. The Alliance was formed as the local education foundation and was founded in 2006.

Stacy Loveless is a long-time volunteer in the area and serves on the Board at the Alliance. She acts as Board secretary, and recently became involved leading communications. She is excited to get the word out about the organization, their fundraisers and educational programs. Stacy was the Eastern PTA President when the Developing Artist grant was approved. Stacy and her husband Chris are raising their four daughters in town. Brittany, Sloane, and Darby have graduated, and Piper is in her sophomore year at GHS.

### **GREENWICH ALLIANCE FOR EDUCATION**



The Alliance was formed as a resource to help the community gather support and help students in the public school system. Their goal is to mobilize the talents of the residents in the area, and give them a platform for sharing their time, attention, and ideas. Julie sounds excited when she says, “the main objectives of the Alliance are to fund innovation, expand opportunities, and

inspire educators.” These goals are applied across grade levels and intended to foster educational success and support a promising future for all students.

To support the programs of the Greenwich Alliance for Education, fundraisers are held during the year. The Annual Turkey Trot is held in November. In 2020, due to Covid-19 the event was held as a month-long challenge to walk and get outdoors. In previous years it has been a race on the Saturday after Thanksgiving at Bruce Park. There are an average of 1,200 participants and a team of 100 support volunteers. Many of these volunteers come from the AVID program at GHS – one of the Alliance’s outreach efforts. In March the Alliance holds an annual TRIVIA Challenge fundraiser. Whether in-person or on-line, the challenge is a great event enjoyed by all participants. The Alliance is also part of the Fairfield County’s Giving Day and relies on donations provided by contributors throughout the year.

The funds raised by these great events support a wide variety of programs. The Alliance provides funding for early childhood education programs in partnership with the Greenwich United Way. They work to ensure students and parents are given the necessary tools to be ready to enter school successfully. Tuning In To Music provides free instrumental music lessons for students eligible for free or reduced price lunch in 4th - 12th grades. The Alliance has invested in many Reaching Out Grants district wide. At Greenwich High School grants funded the implementation of Innovation Lab and the Advancement Via Individual Determination (AVID) college readiness system. AVID, for first generation college bound students, is designed to close the achievement gap and promote equity and access in education.

## **REACHING OUT GRANTS AND THE DEVELOPING ARTIST PROGRAM**



The Developing Artist Program at Eastern Middle School is a Reaching Out Grant (ROG) run by Michael Manning, Ben Quesnel and Stacy Cleary. Ben and Stacy are teachers at Eastern, Ben and Michael schedule the visiting artists and coordinate the program. Teachers and studio artists work together to create a collaborative program that explores all aspects of art. They explore the world of art history, and also art in our contemporary, globalized society.

The stated goals of the Developing Artist grant are to “give students a broader understanding of art, expose them to the possibilities of art

careers, become intentional in their creativity, and develop awareness of themselves as artists, innovators and creators.”

Michael states, “The Developing Artist program allows us to expose our students directly to the contemporary art world by bringing practicing artists into the classroom physically and virtually. We work hard to find artists that have interesting and relatable practices for our students. We seek artists who use materials or conceptual ideas that will challenge how our students understand or interpret what art is and what art can be.”

The program has expanded in recent years, from Eastern to all three middle schools in the district, and the Boys and Girls Club. Michael says, “There is a great level of excitement and respect that happens in the art classroom when we have a visiting artist. Students are excited to

learn from a professional working in the field, and they appreciate the artists' willingness to take time out of their studio to come into our space for a collaborative project." The sessions have been quite varied including visits from sci-fi make-up artists, installation artists, animators, illustrators, architects, and street artists.



Stacy Cleary, EMS art teacher gives an example of a visit from a studio artist. She says, "I met Kenny Hess, a.k.a. Yedi Fresh, several years ago through a friend and followed his work on Instagram. Kenny is one of those prolific artists who creates in a variety of materials and forms of art. He writes comic books, sprays graffiti style murals, makes paintings, illustrations, and drawings. Yedi Fresh was a natural fit for this program and after being a huge hit with our students at Eastern Middle School, we arranged for him to present to the other two Greenwich middle schools."

Michael and Ben, program coordinators, addressed the adaptations necessary during COVID-19 times. "Luckily, we have been able to adapt our program to accommodate remote learning throughout the pandemic. We host virtual studio visits for our students, and we record and edit the footage so we can develop an ongoing archive for future use. The grant also provides artists funds for their work and participation, which is more important now than ever. Through this grant, we have had the privilege of providing paid opportunities for professional artists, exposure, and an opportunity to work with our great students."

Ben says, "As a teacher and an artist, I always want to know that I am doing everything I can to give my students the best possible art experience in the classroom. Sometimes lack of funding can be limiting but grants like the one provided by the Alliance have allowed us to develop an enriching program that provides our students with opportunities that we would not be able to do otherwise. It makes me feel like we are doing something significant for our young aspiring students, and that is why we do it."

For teachers, artists, and students, the enthusiasm and energy has been infectious. The students "see the artist's work with fresh eyes and give unguarded responses and feedback." Everyone draws fresh energy from being in the classroom setting. Students have had a "chance to see new things, to problem solve, and to wonder why and how." Michael states that he doesn't see himself just as a teacher, but now sees this program as an extension of his creativity, which inspires his own work.

## **SUMMARY**

In addition to the Developing Artist Reaching Out the Alliance is hard at work building extensions to the AVID Program. Julie stated that the Alliance is looking for mentors to help guide students through the college prep and application process, as well as adjust to life in college or university once they have matriculated.

Julie and Stacy are excited about the programs offered by the Alliance, and also the support of the community. "There are so many ways to get involved – whether as a mentor to a student, a participant in a fund-raising effort or supporting kids and being excited about what they are

learning.” The Alliance has a great website that is full of information on ways to get involved, volunteer and donate.

Great learning environments and communities are a team, and in this case the team is made up of Ben, Michael, and Stacy, with the support of Julie and Stacy and their team at the Greenwich Alliance. And of course, the students. Any teacher will tell you that the goal is student engagement. These teachers and coordinators report that the students are “all on” - engaged, invested, and excited.

Old Greenwich and Riverside are great places to live, with enthusiastic neighbors who get involved and make things happen. Supporting education and helping area students is an admirable goal, and we are lucky to have residents and educators who bring art, energy, enthusiasm, and creativity to our community.

