

## PROGRAM PROFILE

## Teen Open Studio

VERONICA GRACIA-WING  
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REACH - PHOTO BY DAVE TRUMPIE

REACH Studio Arts Center has a number of arts programs for Lansing children. At its free Teen Open Studio, young adults cultivate an appreciation for developing partnerships and building community through creative art expression.

**Michigan Nightlight: In your view, what makes your program innovative, effective or remarkable?**

REACH Studio Art Center Education Coordinator Jeana-Dee Allen Rogers: Teen Open Studio (TOS) connects teenagers with the community. REACH students come from all over Greater Lansing and find common ground in the arts. More importantly, Teen Open Studio is an avenue for teenagers to gain experience in building partnerships within the community. Teens involved in the program have been part of collaborations that installed seven pieces of public art, raised money for the homeless, interacted with more than a dozen professional artists, created arts-based entrepreneurial businesses -- and that's only the past two years.

We provide teens with opportunities to learn, serve, and be more involved in their communities.

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## PEOPLE PROFILE



**Alice Brinkman**  
Touching lives through art

## ORGANIZATION



### REACH Studio Art Center

Believing that art in all its forms can be a vehicle for hope and healing, REACH Studio Art Center exists to foster

awareness of, appreciation for, encouragement in and skill acquisition of the arts within a neighborhood setting. REACH seeks to connect artists with local residents, local residents with each other, and artists with other artists, and people with a better understanding of their place in this world,

### What was the best lesson learned in the past year?

The best lesson I learned this year was personal. I spend a good amount of my time developing programs, reporting on programs, and writing grants. This means I spend a minimal amount of time in the classroom with students. A few weeks ago a student asked me why I wasn't out with them more. I told him about what I usually do at REACH. What he said surprised me. "I miss it when you're not here. I ask you questions and you always answer, and it's nice to ask questions to someone who cares," he said. This was my reminder for the entire year to not get caught up in paperwork and to take time to enjoy being with students who make it all worthwhile. It's also something I've shared with other volunteers to let them know how important their time is to our students.

...we also acknowledge that they are still teenagers who need to have time to create, laugh, and explore the openness of their futures. We provide both a safe place to invent and to gain experience in professionalism.

### What was the hardest lesson learned in the past year?

Don't underestimate the size of a rhinoceros.

Our teens have spent almost the entire past year working on a program called Community Art Projects, or CAPs. It's a successful pilot project where we have Teen Open Studio students propose and then create a public artwork for a business or organization.

One student created a successful proposal to Potter Park Zoo. The end result was a 4 ½ x 8 foot rhino sculpture. But, we had no idea what we were getting into. We spent two and a half months carrying the sculpture up and down the stairs of REACH, which shares one classroom with more than three other programs throughout the week. Then, we moved onsite at the zoo. Almost two months later and ten bicycle rims, two inner tubes, two glass rocks, two rolls of chicken wire, two garbage bags of cloth, a couple hundred pounds of Ultracal 30 (similar to a plaster/cement mixture), more than 20 feet of PVC, and several gallons of expanding foam later, we had a rhino.

It was a labor of love. One day for snack the teens requested popsicles and doughnuts just to keep themselves full of sugar to keep going. But, every one of our teens worked really hard on it and every student at the end said that it made them feel proud. It was the largest and most involved project the teens have been a part of since I started at REACH. It made our teens feel empowered. At the installation celebration, one of our students said, "When I got to mix that stuff in my hands, I started feeling like I was an artist... finally getting to get my hands dirty, literally. It's just been a beautiful experience seeing things grow from a pile of cardboard to this amazing statue."

### What really differentiates this program?

REACH is the only non-profit in Greater Lansing that offers arts-based year round programming for students ages 2-18 years old. Teen Open Studio is

creating an atmosphere of connectedness, shared pride and creative problem solving.



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different from other programs because our staff and coordinators work to give teens professional opportunities outside of REACH. For example, students wanted to make a sculpture for Potter Park Zoo. Our staff worked with both large and small groups of teens to draft a proposal to the zoo. Then, one teen was nominated to present her ideas to the zoo. We organized a meeting between our student and zoo staff so that she could present her proposal. This not only was a priceless opportunity for the student, it also gave zoo staff an immediate buy-in because they were able to see first hand the dedication and professionalism of our students.

We ask a lot of our teenagers because most of them are looking for opportunities to be treated like adults and to be given responsibility. All of them have had so many life experiences that have prepared them for adulthood. We are proud at

It takes a great deal of courage to take a student's question, help them process their behavior, and work with them to shape positive social interactions.

REACH to be able to provide mentoring opportunities for teens to have guidance in areas they are interested in, such as public speaking, selling art, making a proposal, asking for money to get a project started, and others. But, we also acknowledge that they are still teenagers who need to have time to create, laugh, and

explore the openness of their futures. We provide both a safe place to invent and to gain experience in professionalism.

#### What are the keys to success for your program?

One of our greatest assets is our volunteer mentors. Some of our students come from homes and educational environments where they don't have the opportunity to ask questions and explore new ideas, processes, and potential futures. Because of our volunteers, students can examine new ways of thinking and be mentored in how to interact socially and how to become a successful adult.

However, sometimes answering these questions and being a positive role model is not as easy as making art with youth. Sometimes being a mentor means that our volunteers encounter questions of race, class, stereotypes, and other uncomfortable situations. But, these have all been powerful teaching moments and some of my favorite stories from REACH.

This summer, we had a new mentor working with our teens on an art installation. For the purpose of the interview, you need to know that his physical appearance is Asian. One of our teens walks up to him and asks, "So, are you really good at Kung Fu?" Without even taking a breath, the volunteer turned around and with a smile said, "Why would you ask me that?" The conversation that followed lasted for a good portion of one of our class periods. It covered stereotypes, bullying, understanding differences, and how to communicate questions to someone you want to know better.

Our volunteers are selfless. It takes a great deal of courage to take a student's question, help them process their behavior, and work with them to shape positive

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Arts education contributes to all that we want for Michigan kids: academic achievement, emotional and social maturity, and equitable opportunity. But with pressure to raise standardized test scores, arts and culture programs are often pushed aside. We'll take a look at who is filling the arts gap and why.



### VIDEO: Arts Education Detroit - Filling the Gap

Arts education meaningfully contributes to academic success, social development, civic engagement, and equal opportunity -- all the good things we want for Detroit kids. In our latest Michigan Nightlight video, we look at who's filling the gap in arts education and why.



### VIDEO: Shaping Creativity for Grand Rapids Youth

Colorful, relevant, and inspiring, this Michigan Nightlight video looks at who is filling the gap in arts education in Grand Rapids and why.

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social interactions. I think that giving teenagers access to understanding adults who care and want to help them mature and grow in confidence is the best thing we can all give. It wasn't that long ago that I was a teenager. I remember when I felt like everything I said was awkward. I think pieces of my life might have turned out differently if I could have asked a stranger, "Are you really good at Kung Fu?" and had them respond with respect and honesty.


### How do you innovate programming? Where do the ideas come from? How do you know if they are going to work?

The majority of our programming comes from talking with the teens and their families. Some of the framework comes from my graduate studies; I'm a master's student in the College of Education at MSU. I also spend a bit of my time browsing TED talks and various publications -- seeing how the world is changing and becoming more interested in creativity.


As often as I can, I sit down with the teens and ask them what they want to do in upcoming Teen Open Studio sessions. Some of the ideas have ranged from cooking school to sewing projects to video. Anything is possible and I am proud to work with staff and volunteers who believe we can make anything happen and have the resources to see a project through.


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