

Yes! YAP!

Despite—or perhaps because of—my current job as a freshman English instructor, I often get jittery when charged to lead a discussion with a group of teenagers. Will they be dazzling or droopy? Engaged or detached? Will they sit upright—or, better yet, *tilted forward*—with riveted eyes and sprightly tongues? Or will they recede like lumps into their chairs and draw monstrous ballpoint caricatures of me on their desks? Usually, reality proves mixed, with most students on the lively end of the spectrum. But there are millions of possible classrooms and many more billion possible student configurations: eventually, given the law of large numbers, anything terrible that can happen will happen.

Such were the questions roiling in my brain as I entered a conference room in the Speed Museum to meet with the members of Community Cultural Youth Apprentice Program, henceforth known as "YAP". But my worries dissolved faster than one could enunciate said acronym, as these teens possess the sharpness of electron microscope tips and the vigor of nuclear thermal rockets. I had a list of questions that I had planned to ask them. I soon wished I hadn't bothered. The answers poured in brightly and buoyantly, no incitement needed.

I initially tried to associate comments with faces and names. But alas, the words leapt at me too fleetly and frequently, and my handwriting is inscrutable enough even when I'm scrawling slowly. Besides, there seemed to be a collective, generative glow hovering over the conference table, out of which all information sprang: everyone fed off everyone else's energy, and all was jolly and communal. So in this case, I think anonymity is both inevitable and apropos.

YAP is a group of twelve high school students—I'll call them the YAPs—whose mission can be encapsulated in another acronymic possibility, or at least the first three words thereof: Youth + Art = Positive impact on the local community. And from what I could glean, they can claim

"mission accomplished" on a weekly basis. This yearlong program exemplifies the symbiotic ideal: Everything the YAPs do benefits them, which in turn benefits the community, which in turn benefits the YAPs still more, etc. While the specific tales of their deeds are far more interesting than a stately generalized procedure, I'll offer one anyway, just for reference: First, they study a particular artistic theme, namely, one that relates to one of the Speed's current exhibits. Then, they embark on outreach projects to share their knowledge with local children, as well as senior citizens.

I gathered far more anecdotes about YAP goings-on than I could ever cram into this tiny space. So I'll just present a few of them in the manner in which they are arranged in my notes: haphazardly (but, thanks to computerized font, much more legibly). When the theme of the year was lithography, the YAPs studied the process of lithograph-making, and then travelled around town to teach it to children and seniors alike, who then had the unique opportunity to make their own "lithographs" out of linoleum. When the theme was Abraham Lincoln, the YAPs went around and dressed small children up in beards and top hats—a crucial visual pyrotechnic, given the attention span of six-year-olds being taught the history of Lincoln (or the history of most anything, for that matter, save for perhaps dinosaurs and/or magical pink ponies). Another theme was "face jugs." I was unduly puzzled by this term until I was informed that face jugs are exactly what their moniker suggests: jugs with faces sculpted onto them, which the children of course got to make themselves. Most intriguing, however, is the fact that the jugs were created by slavery-era African-Americans, who used what little media they could muster to maintain a culturally-binding artistic tradition. The YAPs also go on field trips galore: on a backstage tour of the musical *Wicked*; to an art museum in Indianapolis; to a house where every component of the structure was hand-made by the artist who lives there (I still feel astonished, and woefully un-self-reliant, every time I think about this.) Also, I'm pretty sure they get to eat lots of pizza.

As most any educator—parent, professor, or whatever—knows, teaching can be a mutually constructive activity when it is working at its best. And there is so much mutual constructiveness happening in YAP that it's hard to map it out. But my job is to try, and so try I shall: YAP intensifies local youth's engagement in art, thus galvanizing the art scene itself. The YAPs make children and seniors exceedingly happy and appreciative, which in turn makes the YAPs exceedingly happy and appreciative. YAP also, in kindling kids' interest in art, introduces them to a potentially lifelong love for the aesthetic, which may even evolve into professional careers in the field. And, in learning about art themselves, as well as the curatorial, pedagogical and academic (and more) careers that relate to it, the YAPs themselves appear to be finding and focusing on productive academic paths; some of them are already studying art at esteemed colleges and universities, and others are applying to colleges intending to do just that. And speaking of college applications, well, let's just say that YAP provides many impressive credentials for the aspiring historian or curator. Who ever said charitable work shouldn't also pad the ol' resume?

Meeting with the YAPs was whirlwind, flash and fun, and it really made me feel positive about the future of art in Louisville. For more reasons than I care to list, I do not wish to repeat my teenage years. But if I did, a program like YAP would make them happier. And if I ever have kids myself, I'm making them get off the couch and join YAP, regardless of how articulately they argue that video games improve hand-eye coordination. They'll thank me later.

John Vance, University Fellow, Rhetoric and Composition, University of Louisville.

For information about YAPs, please contact Cynthia Moreno, Director of Education at cmoreno@speedmuseum.org or 502.634.2722.

Partial funding for this program is provided by Louisville/Jefferson County Metro Government.