

The Stained Glass Project— Windows that Open Doors

by Joan Myerson Shrager and Paula Mandel

True beauty exists in an oasis in Germantown, Pennsylvania, a Philadelphia neighborhood with high crime where people struggle to make ends meet and hope their children will succeed in a school that for too many years has battled apathy and minimal support. The Stained Glass Project: Windows that Open Doors was founded in 2006 by Paula Mandel, glass artist, and Joan Myerson Shrager, digital artist, and is dedicated to making a difference in that community through art.



*"People are like stained glass windows.
They sparkle and shine when the sun is out,
but when the darkness sets in,
their true beauty is revealed
only if there is a light from within."
Elizabeth Kubler Ross*



Finding a Mission

The Stained Glass Project provides a place where a group of artists who volunteer their time and financial help come together with students from Germantown High School (GHS), which was recently designated as "persistently dangerous." GHS students attend the After School Program of the First United Methodist Church of Germantown (FUMCOG) directed by Dr. Barbara Mitchell to create stained glass art. Artists and students in The Stained Glass Project are a mix of Christians, Jews, Muslims, African-Americans, African émigrés, and Caucasians—from old to young—joined in a common purpose.

Initially the project encouraged students to make decorative objects, but that changed after singer/songwriter Sharon Katz of the Peace Train in South Africa announced she was building a school for AIDS orphans in South Africa. She had a longtime relationship with GHS, FUMCOG, and some members of the artists' group. That is when The Stained Glass Project realized its true mission. The students would make stained glass windows for that South African school.

There is danger in the stained glass process that requires students to learn safe handling of glasscutters, hot soldering irons, acid, flux, lead, and sharp pieces of glass. Becoming skilled in these techniques creates confidence and has a certain cachet. Particularly adept youngsters offer to help others. Soon students who rarely connect in school collaborate and communicate. Groups who often shun each other in school laugh and joke with fellow students at the church. The artists/teachers who might never have interacted on such an intimate level with these youngsters share information about themselves with warmth and affection. Rarely praised students are acknowledged for their accomplishments and creativity without fear of negative repercussions. The program has attracted so much attention that TV-10 Philadelphia filmed the students at work, as did PBS, and KYW Philadelphia taped an interview.

Pride in Creating for Others

With a sense of purpose, students come to the church as often as possible, some even getting permission to skip athletic obligations. After researching, these Philadelphia student artists, with little or no art experience, envision objects of beauty and draw images that their far-away counterparts can relate to. Then they transpose their designs onto glass that was either donated or purchased by the professional artists, who include Michelle Mactavish, Danielle Ruttenberg, Gillian Speeth, Judy Rosenbaum, Amy Kohler, Amy Gray, Caren Borowsky, Gail Cooperman, Joan Myerson Shrager, and Paula Mandel. Some of the artists and others traveled to South Africa with Sharon Katz in August 2010 to hand-carry the windows to her school in Kwangcolosi near Durban, where they will be installed in a large wall.



Visit the following websites to learn more:

www.facebook.com/pages/Germantown-High-School-After-School-Stained-Glass-Program/254994949411

www.youtube.com/watch?v=mUYgy91YV7w

www.nbcphiladelphia.com/news/local/Stained_Glass_Windows_For_South_African_Children_Philadelphia.html

www.myneworleans.com/Blogs/Joie-deve/December-2011/The-Stained-Glass-Project

www.stamfordadvocate.com/news/article/Philly-kids-make-stained-glass-to-brighten-lives-2424651.php

Joan Myerson Shrager is a professional digital artist. Her artwork is in the permanent collection of the University of Pennsylvania and cited in two art teaching textbooks, as well as on several major digital websites.

joan-myersonshrager.com

www.facebook.com/joanmyersonshrager.digitalart

Paula Mandel is a professional glass sculptor whose work is included in the book, Best of America: Glass Artists & Artisans. She combinesameworking, kiln casting, fusing, and cold working with found objects to create psychological sculptures with moving components.

paula-mandel.com

One of the GHS students from Ghana suggested that Morris Jeff Community School in New Orleans, Louisiana, be the next destination for these student-created windows. This season, another set of windows was taken to Morris Jeff, one of the most racially and economically diverse open-access public schools in the history of the city. FIRSTRUST Bank of Philadelphia was so impressed with the program that it sponsored the trip. A *Times-Picayune* reporter covered the visit to the school, and an AP reporter spent the day with the students at FUMCOG. Her article has been published throughout the United States.

The Stained Glass Project continues with windows being made for an exhibition of Mandel's glass sculptures and Shrager's digital art in collaboration with the stained glass students' windows at the James E. Marks Intercultural Center at Drexel University from April 5 through June 2, 2012. The windows in this exhibition, *Hand-Eye Collaboration*, will go to the Community Partnership School in inner-city Philadelphia. The next set of windows will be created for an Ojibwe People's School in Bemidji, Minnesota.

Every week something happens to reinforce the sense of accomplishment and pride in the Stained Glass Project, from a warm interaction between unlikely people or someone mastering a skill to just plain joyous bantering. One student from last year returned with hugs for the artists. A painfully shy French-speaking African student who speaks little English lights up as the artists attempt to reach out to her with their high school French. Students from past years stop by to say hello, and new students see the pride that comes from creating for others, many of whom are less fortunate than they. The gift of art has brought this improbable group together. John Updike said, "What art offers is space—a certain breathing room for the spirit."

GPO