

St. Louis

RAC to host national community arts forum

By Julia Werner - March 17, 2010

What could a painter and a social worker have in common? St. Louis is about to find out.

Starting on March 25, the St. Louis Regional Arts Commission and its Community Arts Training (CAT) institute will host “At the Crossroads: A Community Arts and Development Convening,” a forum geared toward learning and collaboration between artists and various community organizers and human service agencies striving to position art as a source of community development.

The forum shares the objectives of the CAT institute, which recently graduated its 13th class from its five-month program.

“We take eight artists of all disciplines and eight people who are social workers, community organizers, educators and we cross-train them so they speak the same language,” said Roseann Weiss, director of community art programs and public art initiatives for the Regional Arts Commission. “The graduates of the CAT institute usually go out there and collaborate in some way, shape or form.”

Having attended similar conferences in the past, Weiss has been working for several years to establish one locally and said she felt that St. Louis would be a prime location.

“I’m very excited to show off St. Louis, to show off what we’re doing and to have this great conversation about what it means to use the arts to develop communities and neighborhoods and to change the way we look at things,” Weiss said.

Weiss cited the local community collabARTive project (now in its 10th year) developed by two CAT institute graduates — Tom Burnham, a case manager at Peter and Paul Community Services, and Con Christeson, an artist and Central West End resident. Their program provides men in the transitional housing program at Peter and Paul an opportunity to work with professional artists, writers and videographers to create different types of art that reflect their journey from homelessness to independent living.

“The men who are in the program are working, saving money and moving toward housing in the community while still being sort of a part of the culture of the emergency shelter,” Christeson said.

The three-day conference will consist of a variety of workshops, performances and presentations varying from topics like photography and social issues to the psychology of creative teens.

Just as diverse as the topics being presented are those who will attend to discuss them. “There are so many people with a lot of different kinds of expertise because we’re really looking for a cross section of people,” Weiss said. “I think we’ll have some really rich conversations.”

Participants include Bill Cleveland of the Center for the Study of Art and Community in Seattle; Arlene Goldbard, author of *New Creative Community*; and Barbara Schaffer Bacon and Pam Korza, co-directors of Animating Democracy in Washington, D.C.

The event is set to begin Thursday afternoon with a pre-convening workshop titled “What Difference Are We Making? Assessing Social Impact of Arts for Community Change” led by Maine artist Marty Pottenger and evaluator Chris Dwyer from RMC Research.

“It’s a pretty intense five-hour workshop on evaluating what we do and being able to talk about what we do and show that it works and how it works,” Weiss said.

Later that evening, the joint task force cast from the Playback Workshop Theatre, an eclectic local theater ensemble, will conduct an interactive presentation with all 150 attendees.

“[The joint task force cast] do social justice, life skills, character education, literacy, diversity and they do feminine theory from an African-American male-driven perspective,” said Jacqueline Masei, founding artistic director of Playback Workshop Theatre. “What the gentlemen are going to do is a short introduction and a piece that’s going to welcome people from all over and get them excited about their own personal stories, about being African American, being community artists, their voice and then also how that voice connects to partnerships to community and to the greater national community of artists.”

Weiss said Friday will follow a typical conference format with Saturday being a day for “open space technology,” where people are given the opportunity to continue conversations from the previous days on topics they found especially engaging or important.

“There’s lots of ways to use art and creativity to spur changes within community,” Weiss said. “My biggest hope is that people will be frustrated because there’s so much great stuff they want to go to and they can’t go to it all.”

“I feel like it’s important for St. Louis to have a conference like this and to engage people from around the country and around the world really in this conversation,” Christeson said. “But I’m particularly excited to have it here because it is a very valuable resource for me and professionally I feel like it’s going to be good information, good context and hopefully it will lead to more conferences and more projects that involve sharing what we do here in St. Louis and expanding what we do to wider audiences.”

- For more information, including how to register for the convening, visit www.crossroadsconvening.com