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Bob Kerr: At Rhode Island's training school, an unexpected, wonderful art space

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Glenn Osmundson/The Providence Journal

Artist Ricky Gagnon is the volunteer curator of the New Hope Gallery at the Thomas C. Slater Training School in Cranston. The art on display includes works by residents of the training school.



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BY BOB KERR

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The entrance to the Thomas C. Slater Training School in Cranston does not tend to be a happy place. People would rather not be there. They would rather their kids did not mess up and make the visit necessary.

But staff members at the training school have been noticing how the art — the unavoidable art that is all over the place — draws people to it.

“Parents come in, they see the art, they say ‘What is this?’ ” says Joe Cardin, the training school’s acting superintendent.

What it is is an art gallery, the most unlikely and wonderfully unexpected art gallery in Rhode Island. It is the New Hope Gallery and it turns art into a way to ease the stress in a hard time and a hard place. It makes art accessible in a very compassionate way.

“This was a brand new building,” says Ricky Gagnon, an artist who is the volunteer curator of the gallery. “There was nothing on the walls.”

But the walls in the entrance seem to invite a creative splash. They are mostly glass, spilling light into the room. And the dividers in the windows, though perhaps not intended to be display space for art, have become display space for art.

The gallery, once Gagnon started putting up shows of work that include that of training school residents, has spilled down hallways and into offices. There are vibrant colors and intriguing images worked into places where young criminal offenders are the focus of the workday.

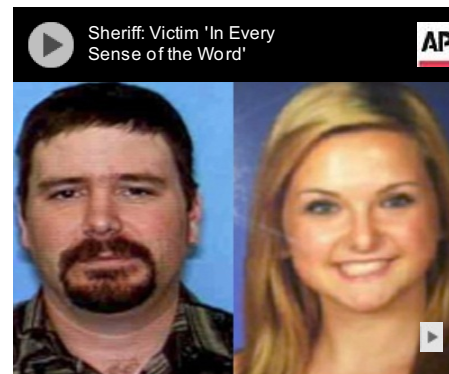
A prosecutor from the Rhode Island attorney general’s office recently bought a painting of Godzilla at the gallery. It was done by a training school resident.

In its three years, The New Hope Gallery has made some intriguing connections. There was the time not long ago when Sheila Robinson, daughter of Ray Charles, came to the training school as part of a ministry that often



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visits correctional facilities. While there, she sang “Georgia” in a way that those who heard her said she created a hush in which you could hear a pin drop.

Robinson also noticed paintings of John Lennon, Jimi Hendrix and James Dean on an office wall. She asked why there was no painting of her father. So artist Jeremy Arruda did a painting of Ray Charles that will be sent to Robinson.

When a new exhibit opens, which happens three times a year, residents of the training school are there to greet visitors and meet the artists. It does wonders for social skills.

For Ricky Gagnon, the gallery is a way of giving back. He is an artist who runs a cleaning company to pay the bills. He describes his own work as having “an abstract kind of pop art feel.”

“It’s pretty out-there,” he says. “It’s very humorous.”

And he started the gallery with the help of some friends and absolutely no budget. Artists Sandy DeLuca and Teddy DiLucia help put up the art.

Word has gotten around. There is a new space for art and it is in a public building and it just might reach audiences other galleries don’t.

A lot of artists have brought their work to New Hope. There is painting, photography, and Gagnon hopes to create a space for sculpture in the courtyard next to the entrance.

Every exhibit includes work by residents. And every exhibit includes work by artists of AS220, which does such wonderful work at the training school teaching art and also offering opportunities to kids when they get out.

Lee Sperduti, an administrator at the training school, has a lively chunk of the gallery on her office walls and was one of the early supporters of the project. She says the gallery helps people visiting the school to not immediately think “prison” when coming in the door.

Sperduti also says it’s important to reach kids with positive opportunities before they get their “adult brain.”

“Families come in and I see them looking at the pictures,” says Sperduti. “When they wait out here they are stressed to begin with. If there can be something peaceful, it helps.”

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