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Program Helps Harlem Children Reach Goals Through Art Updated March 13, 2012 9:28am

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HARLEM — As a child in New Delhi, India, Adarsh Alphons would do anything to paint and draw — even if it meant getting in trouble in school.

"The teacher would say, 'You are drawing, drawing, drawing — but this is math class,'" Alphons, 27, said. "I used to draw in every class so much that I got kicked out of school."

On the verge of getting kicked out of a second school, Alphons met a principal who encouraged his passion for art — and before long the young boy was hosting showings of his work for international icons like Nelson Mandela, Mother Teresa and Pope John Paul II.

"All of these opportunities opened up because one person took a chance and said let this kid keep drawing," Alphons, who now lives in Washington Heights, said.

Now, Alphons is trying to pay it forward. He is hoping to provide the same opportunities for children in Harlem and the rest of New York City with the newly launched [Adarsh Alphons Projects](#). Participants in the tuition-free program not only produce art, they discuss the ideas behind it.

They also learn about the business and entrepreneurial side of being an artist. After their works are completed, they are displayed in SoHo and Chelsea galleries and offered for sale. The children get to keep the profits.

"I love being with the kids and watching their growth and going on that journey with them," Alphons said. "We want them to see the commercial part of [the] art world and know that if you take it seriously enough you can sell your work."

On a recent Saturday at the project's new space in a townhouse on Hamilton Terrace, Alphons sat in a circle with a group of children discussing the ideas behind their project. One student had drawn a picture of zombies, but with no humans.

"The moment you put a person in the picture it changes because all of a sudden there's something human beings can relate to," Alphons said.

A few minutes later he was helping Quintin Harris, 11, who was trying to draw a picture of a giant hand holding the earth in its forefinger and thumb. The hand looked more animal than human.

Alphons grabbed a roll of tape and held it between his thumb and forefinger.

"See how the flesh is hanging," Alphons said, using his hand as a model. "It's all a part of the hand."

After a couple of shows in India as a child, Alphons' first brush with fame came when Mandela, then South Africa's president, came to India in 1995. Only 10 years old at the time, Alphons presented Mandela with a pencil sketch, which Mandela autographed, along with another one that Mandela took back to his office.

When he was 12, Alphons met Mother Teresa during a meet-and-greet and presented her with a painting called "Golden Hands." It was a faceless picture of Mother Teresa that depicted her hands in a prayer position. The image signified the ability to do good regardless of identity.

In 1999, the painting was selected as the backdrop for a speech Pope John Paul II gave during a visit to India. Alphons turned the painting into a 500-square-foot mural by painting 15 panels with the Indian flag as a backdrop. The same year, Alphons had shows in Chelsea in Manhattan and in London.

"I was kicked out of a school. My only salvation was art. If it wasn't for art and that one principal, who knows what I would have been into," Alphons said. "I found an outlet and some meaning in life."

After graduating from the Maryland Institute College of Art, Alphons began working at [chashama](#), an organization founded by Anita Durst that turns vacant spaces into galleries. He then worked at [Harlem School of the Arts](#) as the head of the visual arts program.

When the group ran into financial trouble, Alphons decided to break out on his own. He borrowed a pastor's office and launched the art project. News about the program began spreading, and now there are now 60 students, up from 10.

"I wanted to work in the community. I wanted to help kids create something awesome because once you do that, it stays with you. No one can take it away," Alphons said.

He later reached out to Durst for support but she waited almost a year to support the project in an effort to see how committed he was, Alphons believed.

"He believes in what he is doing," Durst said. "I love the energy and vision he gives to the kids. You see the transformation in the way he is allowing them to do their own projects."

Parent Peggy Beane, who brings her daughter, Arielle, 12, to the project, said art has become a vital form of expression for her budding, "brooding artist."

"It's her way of expression. I get to see what she's thinking," Beane said as her daughter looked on.

"I like the whole experience," Arielle said.

Anthony Blake, 21, an intern at the program, is a student at the [School of Visual Arts](#) studying animation. He met Alphons while he was at Harlem School of the Arts.

"He helped me with my portfolio to get into the School of Visual Arts. Everyone that wanted to help me wanted money. He did it for free," Blake said.

"I think he understands that art helps you to express yourself," he added.

Alphons is preparing for an expansion, increasing classes from just weekends to a few times per week and hiring three teachers. He sees himself in a lot of his students.

"What kids want is similar everywhere. They want someone to connect with them and hear their perspective of the world and give them a place to create dreams," Alphons said. "They are creating their dreams here."

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