

Angels AMONG US

ORDINARY PEOPLE
WITH EXTRAORDINARY HEARTS

the artist's touch

SUSAN RODGERSON

IN THE MID-1980s, SUSAN RODGERSON, a painter living in Massachusetts' South Shore region, had what a lot of artists crave. She had name recognition, she could support herself with her work, and she even had a local gallery fronting the rent for her Boston studio as she prepared for an upcoming exhibition. But Rodgerson needed a change.

"Making art is about learning who you are, and I was tired of myself," she says. "I was tired of seeing what I was about. I wanted to know about other people and build a community around creating things."

Through a part-time teaching stint, Rodgerson saw an opportunity to bridge some important gaps: between urban students and the art world, between Boston's youth and the business community, between how things are made and how stuff gets sold. The idea centered on creating collaborative art projects with students, works that could then be sold to Boston businesses. "Their voices would be on the walls of big banks and law offices," she explains. And the program would be self-funded; the sale of one project would cover the costs of the next one. It was bold and unique and not entirely understood. Rodgerson approached several Boston middle schools about her plan. On her 14th try, she finally got a yes.

In May 1991 Artists for Humanity (AFH) launched in the cramped library space of a Dorchester middle school. A small group of eighth-graders turned out for the program, and over the course of three intense weeks met every day after classes to create a 4x12-inch oil painting, the rights to which were eventually sold to Nellie Mae, the national student-loan program, for use on the cover of its annual report. When it was over and the summer break hit, Rodgerson's students asked what was next.

They still are. Now in its 21st year, AFH serves 225 Boston youth, ages 14 to 20, here each year, and another 2,000 through adjunct programming. Every day at around

3:00, young people descend on AFH's South Boston headquarters, an airy, light-filled LEED Platinum building (dubbed the "EpiCenter") designed by one of Rodgerson's former students and filled with studio and woodshop space for painting, video, graphic design, silk screening, photography, Web design, and sculpture.

Besides art instruction, students are immersed in the business side of the creative process, meeting with clients—which have ranged from commercial developers to Suffolk University Law School to Logan International Airport—and developing goods (logos, art installations, T-shirts, bike racks, and other custom product lines) for them. Students are paid to be at AFH, and they're paid for the work they produce and sell. For 2011, AFH is projected to generate some \$1.2 million in revenue, half of which has gone back to the artists in the form of commissions and wages.

"We're giving kids an opportunity to earn the respect they're looking for," says Rodgerson, whose staff of 31 includes several of her original students who've returned to AFH as instructors. "They're doing a job that's valuable and important. They're meeting with the captains of industry, and they're in the driver's seat. It changes their sense of self, and that was my goal. I wanted kids to feel that change of self that I discovered through art."

Jason Talbot found exactly that. An AFH co-founder, the 34-year-old was one of Rodgerson's original students; today he's an instructor and mentor. He knows firsthand the importance of the organization and its power to change lives. "[Before AFH] I didn't know who I was or where I was going," he says. "But hanging out with Susan, I became an artist. That's me. That's who I am. It defined a path and helped me find success."

For more on Artists for Humanity, visit: afhboston.com