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Morales working on a sewing machine.
Photo by By Molly Tarbell.

Yollocalli Arts Program Inspires Students to Pursue Artistic Endeavors

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By Molly Tarbell

Contributor

Three afternoons a week, high school senior Elizabeth Morales commutes about an hour from Chicago Lawn to [Yollocalli Arts Reach](#) at 18th Street and Blue Island Avenue for the first art class she has ever taken.

Yollocalli is an arts education initiative of the [National Museum of Mexican Art](#) founded in 1997, which offers a variety of events and programs, including free ten-week afterschool art classes for youth ages 13 to 21.

For different classes, students apply either through [After School Matters](#), a Chicago non-profit organization, or through Yollocalli directly. Students in the classes affiliated with After School Matters, such as the Pop Life class in which Morales is enrolled, are given a stipend for their participation.

Pop Life, which runs from October 5 to December 9, is led by teaching artists Ray Arroyo and Corinne Webb. Arroyo and Webb introduced the students to Pop Art, then took them to a thrift store to purchase a few items to combine to make into a new piece of wearable art or a toy.

Arroyo explained that they highlighted the pop culture aspects of the Pop Art movement in order to make it more relatable to the youth. They focused on lowbrow art, cartoon characters, graphics, sculpture, and fashion.

For her project, Morales was sewing together a section of lime-green netting and an altered leopard-print shirt. Before the Pop Life class, she had never used a sewing machine, but Arroyo was patient in showing her how, she said.

“[Corinne and Ray] are beyond helpful. They’re not the kind of teachers who are intimidating,” Morales said. “They push you in the right direction, but in the end, they let you do what you want as an artist.”

In class, the students work largely independently, with Arroyo and Webb circulating the room and giving one-on-one attention as needed. Arroyo encouraged students to be as creative as possible with their projects, saying things like, “Commit to your ideas,” and when Morales claimed that she had “messed up,” he told her: “Just keep going. Don’t be afraid of it.”

Vanessa Sanchez, Youth Programs Projects Coordinator, started working with Yollocalli as a student in 2001, before becoming an intern and then a full-time staff member. While she can measure success of the program in accolades, such as the Coming Up Taller Award (now the National Arts and Humanities Youth Program Award) that the program received in 2009, Sanchez says that one of the biggest signs of success is simply having students return.

Bokhari Larry, a sophomore at Chicago Academy for Advanced Technology, and Alvaro Padilla, 17, have both taken classes at Yollocalli before.

Pop Life is the third Yollocalli class that Larry has taken—his favorite being a carnival-themed class in which he learned art, juggling and circus acts. While he did have art classes

in elementary school and a high school he previously attended, he does not have them at his current school. Working on adding brightly colored fabric pieces and paint to a red jacket, Larry said that he was interested in going to college for art.

Padilla, constructing a top hat from wire and strips of black fabric, said that he loves art, but does not see it as a career. He plans to go to community college before transferring to a four-year college or university, and he wants to become a lawyer eventually. Pop Life is the fourth Yollocalli class he has taken, and he said that he had not been involved in any other afterschool activities in high school.

“I spent most of my time here, I guess,” Padilla said.

An obstacle for some of the youth, from Arroyo’s perspective, is that “the Latino community doesn’t value art as a career.” He explained that young people are pushed to be doctors or lawyers—something professional—instead.

Arroyo wants the students to know that no matter what they do, art can be a part of their lives.

“A lot of these kids are coming from schools with no art,” he said. “We want to show them that they can be versatile, that they can have support.”

While the stipend is an incentive to get involved and attend class regularly, most students leave with enhanced appreciation for art.

“They want to come in and work,” Arroyo explained, acknowledging that some students do participate in part because of the money they receive.

But, he said, “I’d rather have them working here than at a job that leaves them with nothing.”

For Morales, Pop Life is more than just an afterschool activity. She wants to go to college for architecture or graphic design, both of which she would need experience in sketching, she explained. Having never had access to art classes in school, she had to look elsewhere to get the preparation she would need for college and a career.

Morales commented that many of the students commute to Yollocalli, like she does, but that for her, it doesn’t matter.

“I don’t get home till eight at night, and then I have homework,” she said. In addition to homework she also has to worry about filling out college applications. “But if you really want to do it, you put in the effort.”

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