

'Fresh Artists': Taking student art to the marketplace

by Jennifer Katz

"Fill this place with the faces of the children." That was her mandate, given to her by then Philadelphia School District Superintendent Paul Vallas.

When Barbara Chandler Allen, 62, of Lafayette Hill, walked, into the atrium of the 850,000-square-foot building at Broad and Arch street, she had no idea what Vallas had in store for her. Nor could she have known that his edict that day would set her forth on a path to bring entrepreneurship to hundreds of public school children in Philadelphia through Fresh Artists.

Many residents are already familiar with Fresh Artists, although they might not realize it. But if you've been to the new Weaver's Way Co-op on Germantown Avenue and stood in line to check out, you may have noticed the large painting hanging on the upper left wall. It's not actually a painting. The piece of art in the co-op is a reproduction of a high-resolution digital photograph of a 12th grader's painting.

In 2005, Vallas called Allen to the Philadelphia Inquirer's former printing plant, which the school district had just purchased and intended to use as its new headquarters.

"He wanted me to bring the children into the building," Allen said.

Standing in the large, white, austere atrium, the task seemed challenging. Allen, who describes herself as a "place maker," had first met Vallas when her son Roger was a high school student at the Charter High School for Architecture and Design.

In his sophomore year at Chestnut Hill Academy, Roger decided he'd had enough. He wanted to go somewhere else for the rest of high school. He found CHAD, enrolled

and introduced his mother to public education in Philadelphia.

"It completely changed my life," she said. "I became passionate about urban education, public education."

Allen, who had worked at both the Peabody Museum at Harvard and the Philadelphia Museum of Art was a stay-at-home mom for 22 years, joined the board, became the school's first director of development and started a foundation to support the school (Eventually, she raised enough money to buy the building the school now leases from the foundation).

Standing in the atrium, she thought of one person who needed to see it, to help her decide how to bring the faces of the children to life on those walls. The next day she returned with Roger.

"He said one word," she remembered. "Digital"

The mother and son went down the street and grabbed a cup of coffee.

"It took about an hour," she said. "We had the whole idea figured out."

Cruz Gallardo-Bernal was a senior at Roxborough High School when he drew a vibrantly colored rendition of the woods. His original, an 18" x 24", sketched in colored pencil, is now a 4' x 5' poster at Weaver's Way.

The checkout counter spot is one of Fresh Artists latest programs, Art in the Market. They pair a sponsor with the prime spot at the co-op for a six-month stint.

Valley Green Bank, which has agreed to sponsor three consecutive spots at the co-op, is the first sponsor. The bank chooses the piece and can change it every six months. Once Valley Green's sponsorship



Fresh Artists founders Barbara Chandler Allen and her son Roger Allen at Weaver's Way Co-op. Behind them is "The Woods" by Roxborough High School student Cruz Gallardo-Bernal.

expires, another will be provided for the next six months and so on and so forth.

Art in the Market is based on Fresh Artists' basic business model. When Barbara and Roger left the café that day they knew two things. First they were going to need children's artwork and second they were going to need to make it really big.

Roger, who had graduated from CHAD and become an industrial

designer, came up with the idea to take very high-resolution photographs of artwork and have it reproduced in large wall-size mounted prints.

In the two months they had to prepare the atrium for its big debut at the beginning of the school year, Fresh Artists (which would not be

officially incorporated as a non-profit for two more years) managed to fulfill Vallas' mandate. The children's work, wall-sized, hugged the atrium's walls.

Allen was well acquainted with the school district and becoming chummy with many of its art teach-

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