

SeeSaw Studio

Durham, North Carolina

Category: Afterschool; Artist Residency; Planning; Job Training

Where do kids go when they're too old for the playground and too young for the workplace? They graduate from the seesaw to SeeSaw, a design studio where adolescents are artists and art is a business. Modeled on YA/YA (Young Aspirations /Young Artists), a nationally known afterschool program in New Orleans, SeeSaw gives kids the opportunity to work their way up the Ladder of Success, from entry level to apprentice to senior designer.

Executive Director Amy Milne and Artistic Director Mara Matthews would rather be seen by these young artists as colleagues than as bosses and teachers. SeeSaw artists—youth between the ages of 13 and 21— work independently and cooperatively to create the kinds of art that create their own markets. Some projects get sold after they're made: pillows, handmade journals, hats and handbags. Other projects involve finding a client to commission a specially designed piece that will have lasting impact: art that does good in the world.

Two such projects have involved teamwork, much effort and faith. For these projects, SeeSaw began a tradition of bringing in guest Resident Artists to provide a whole new aesthetic and to facilitate the work of the students. Now a fiber art piece graces the walls of the Durham Department of Social Services. Designed by the SeeSaw student-artists and Peg Gignoux to create a soothing environment in a very stressful place, the fiber art piece is threaded through with the word for *listen* in Spanish: *escuchen*. To complement the wall art, and provide an even more inviting environment, the SeeSaw student-artists created planters, brightly colored kid-sized chairs and paintings of people with many colors of skin so everyone who walks through the door will find herself or himself reflected back.

From the entrance of El Centro Hispano shines the warm, inspiring face of Rigoberta Menchú, recipient of the Nobel Peace Prize for her work in Guatemala to create social justice and understanding. Rigoberta's face, carefully carved into squares of wood, colored in the variety of skin tones found throughout the world, and assembled like a puzzle, is work of a collaboration between SeeSaw student-artists and Jovenes Lideres en Accion (Youth Leaders in Action) under the direction of woodworker Richard Goldberg.

SeeSaw is branching out, offering workshops to school systems, individual schools and other organizations where young artists wait to be discovered. Why do this work? Because, as Amy says, "There's a small, ever-shrinking space for true originality. Mass culture numbs kids to their power to create new things. I would like to see that space widened and defined to make these kids see how powerful they are as generators of design."

Besides, she says, "It helps to be able to say to parents: 'It is absolutely okay for your kids to major in painting in college, and here are the jobs they can have when they get out.'"

SeeSaw Studio: www.seesawstudio.org

YA/YA: www.yayainc.com