TGAS & OKCGAS: Advancing Girls in Creativity, Confidence, and Success Through Art
by Roxanne Beason

Public schools have taken a hard hit due to the heavy budget cuts in Oklahoma’s education department. Perhaps the most troubling thing about our dwindling funding for our public schools is the rapidly disappearing availability of performing and visual arts programs. This issue is particularly noticeable in some of the lower-income zip codes within Tulsa and Oklahoma City public school systems. These schools receive the least funding for extracurriculars outside of athletics and vocational skills training. Despite Oklahoma’s ongoing budget crisis, providing funding for athletics has never seemed to be an issue, and that automatically gives boys an advantage to train for sports that could potentially become successful careers. While girls are still awarded similar opportunities in athletics, girls still need something meaningful and fulfilling that’s just for them, and having such an activity and a place to make that happen was the initial motivation behind establishing the non-profit organizations, Tulsa Girl’s Art School and Oklahoma City Girl’s Art School. TGAS and OKCGAS have become havens where underserved girls have a chance to learn a variety of skills and build friendships by exploring and making art.

Having previous experience teaching art and raising money for programming in Tulsa Public Schools, Matt Moffett was approached by Mona Pittanger to start an afterschool art program for just girls. In 2007, TGAS was founded with $300,000 and the mission of giving girls their own extracurricular outlet. Ever since, TGAS has successfully operated on donations and earned revenue, and enrollment continues to increase. Enrollment selection

(clockwise left to right) OKCGAS students admiring the work of Dale Chihuly at the Oklahoma City Museum of Art
OKCGAS with artist Amanda Zoey Weathers in front of mural, Wind Wall, by Weathers and Erin Cooper
OKCGAS students experiencing Modern Family by Krystle Brewer at OVAC’s Momentum OKC 2017
starts when the girls are 8 years-old and they are picked from a school in North or West Tulsa, where teachers are approached and asked to recommend a talented art student for the program. Once admitted to the program, the girls remain for the duration of their high school career and receive assistance to seek higher education afterwards.

The girls start out in a beginner’s level class their first year and learn the basics of drawing and painting. When they move up to the advanced level class, the girls get to explore working with other mediums of their choosing including ceramics, glass blowing, and welding. The advanced class frequently goes on field trips to explore art in other places like Chicago, San Francisco, and St. Louis, among others.

Not only are the girls learning skills in art making, but they are also learning how to sell and market their work. TGAS now has over 70 students and hosts several shows a year to showcase and sell the girls’ work. What the girls earn from their sold art is kept in their own savings account which teaches them the value of their work as well as how to manage money. As the girls hone their artistic abilities and learn fiscal responsibility after school, it is not surprising Moffett’s students go on to higher education to continue their studies in art. “Watching girls build confidence, expand artistic skills, and become strong leaders within their peer groups is what drives us [at TGAS],” says Moffett.

Modeling after Moffett’s TGAS program, teaching artist and executive director, Kiona Millirons, has been gaining momentum for growing the OKGAS program. After only three years, Millirons has expanded the program into a permanent space behind the IAO (Individual Artists of Oklahoma) Gallery in downtown OKC with 30 students in total. I visited with Millirons (or “Miss Kiona” as her students refer to her) and second-year students. They had previously learned about Wassily Kandinsky by painting pieces inspired by his synesthetic way in which he painted colors and shapes based on sound. They had listened to two songs, a jazz and a classical piece, and then sketched how the music made them feel and were working on a painting based on their own synesthetic experience. While encouraging the girls’ imaginations to run rampant, Millirons is fueling creativity while still helping her students with formal compositional elements and pushing their techniques similarly to any upper-level art school. Making them really think about their creations, Millirons pushes them to finish each project and write about their critical thought processes in their art journal.

Having the school inside IAO Gallery serves as a place for the students to sell their work periodically while also allowing for the girls to meet interact with local artists and their works that show within the same space. Millirons explained that the school operates as a “safe space and a positive atmosphere” for the girls, and for her, the most rewarding aspect of her work is, “seeing students get a sense of accomplishment after doing something that seemed so challenging.” The girls at OKCGAS are recruited in the same way as TGAS and are also allotted their own savings account for the earnings of their work.

For many of the participating students, these schools become a refuge and a place where they feel comfortable expressing themselves. TGAS and OKCGAS are a chance for girls to see the world from a creative perspective while simultaneously unlocking their potential as artists and entrepreneurs. While Moffett and Millirons are doing inspiring work for these girls, they teach and provide transportation for the girls to get to and from the facility, and while they do so much to support these girls, they still need your support too. There are several ways in which you can help and support both TGAS and OKCGAS, you can visit tulsgirlartschool.org or okcgirlartschool.org and donate through their websites. Be sure to check the events calendar on their websites or follow them on Facebook to find out where and when to attend future fundraisers or visit student exhibitions.

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