

The Harlem Community Art Center

By Gwendolyn Bennett

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1. Cumulative reports are most enlightening things! They are almost more enlightening to those who prepare them than to those who read them. Not until such a report on the Harlem Community Art Center was being compiled, covering the period from its beginning, November, 1937, to March 31st, 1939, was I able to realize the full import of its work. One goes about in the community saying many things fervently and trustfully; but it is not until a comprehensive report on the job has been made that it is possible to know for certain whether the things we have said and believed are actually true.

2. I have been talking and thinking about the Harlem Community Art Center for about four years. It was a dream when Negro artists forming the Harlem Artists' Guild met to pool their experiences in a discussion of ways to bring about the establishment of a permanent art center for Harlem. The individual experiences of several artists had led this group to believe that there was a real necessity for such a center. Augusta Savage had been holding art classes for years; first Lessene Welles, then Charles Alston and Henry W. Bannarn had cooperated with the 135th Street Branch of the New York Public Library in the program of the Harlem Workshop; and many other artists in smaller ways had been at work in the fulfillment of a community need for a place where those who wished to learn might study free of cost, and where instruction in the use of creative materials might be made available to a wide public. And so in a dream motivated by the urgency of fact many of the precepts governing the program of the Harlem Community Art Center were laid down.

3. When classes were organized by the WPA/FAP, first in a renovated garage known as the Uptown Art Laboratory, and later in the Music-Art Center, this dream began to take shape. Working closely with Augusta Savage, who was in

charge of both of these ventures, I began to see an ideal acquire bone and sinew. The establishment of the Harlem Community Art Center in a large empty loft at the corner of 125th Street and Lenox Avenue began to symbolize the growth and maturity of this ideal. The coming of eager children to register in the classes, the formation of a sponsoring committee, the long line of visitors from Harlem and from the rest of the country, and the growing enthusiasm among the people who worked in the Center acted like a strong tonic on the entire community.

4. In January, 1938, when I became acting director of the Center, and later when I was made the director, I found that I had brought to the task a whole set of ideals and ideas born in the minds of many people and deriving from many sources. So impelling were these ideals and so important was the work at hand that individuals willingly identified themselves with the collective will of the many. Many minds became one. As a result, the Harlem Community Art Center is becoming not only a cultural force in its particular locale, but a symbol in the culture of a race.

5. Thoughts like these are heady and appear to grow glib on the tongue as one goes about talking, almost preaching, the virtues of the Harlem Community Art Center. It is not until these beliefs are checked against the facts contained in a comprehensive report that one knows them to be true and begins to realize their full significance.

6. What did the Center's cumulative report show?

7. First, and possibly the most important fact: 70,592 people by actual count had attended the Center's activities during the sixteen months it had been in operation. Apologies for saying and believing that the Center meets a community need are no longer necessary when facts prove that it has reached an average of more than 4,000 people a month.

8. And who are these people who have been reached by the

Center? Exactly 2,467 children and adults have registered in the art classes. More than 23,989 people have participated in the Center's extension activities, lectures, and demonstrations. Thousands of others come to the Center regularly to see the exhibitions and to attend other special events.

9. These visitors have come to the Center from every part of the United States and from England, Scotland, the British West Indies, China, Japan, France, the Netherlands, Palestine, and Germany. Teachers, students, writers, social engineers, and people from every walk of life have come to the Center and have sent their friends. Impelled by curiosity at first, most of the Center's visitors have ended up by signing our guest book with humility and expressions of profound respect.

10. Forming a sponsors' group and drawing to it distinguished citizens from all walks of our national life to which the Negro has made a significant contribution, has been a challenging and often thrilling task. An equally effective bulwark of support and encouragement has come from the parents of children who attend the Center's classes and from large groups belonging to the community's large working class. Within this rank-and-file sponsorship there exists a genuine consciousness of what the Center means as a necessary stimulant to the development of Negro culture in America.

11. The events of major importance that have taken place at the Center are too numerous to itemize. Certainly the gracious visit of Mrs. Franklin D. Roosevelt on December 20, 1937, the Center's official opening day, is one of the most memorable of these. The exhibition, "Art and Psychopathology," jointly sponsored by the WPA/FAP and Bellevue Hospital, which drew to the Center so many eminent psychologists and psychiatrists, is another significant event. Nor will we soon forget the visits of Albert Einstein, the famous scientist, and Paul Robeson, the internationally recognized singer and actor.

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12. Equally exciting has been the experience by watching delinquent and maladjusted children sent to the Center from psychiatric wards of the city hospitals become stable material with which to build future citizens. Gratifying too has been watching Robert Blackburn, one of our students, develop his talents and win recognition last year by being awarded two first prizes in a nationally conducted high-school art competition, and this year receive, upon his graduation from school, a year's scholarship to study at the Art Students' League.

13. More important than all of these things has been the developing philosophy and understanding behind the work of the Center. In each person at work in the Center there has grown a new selflessness and dignity in the performance of the smallest task. A new understanding of the value and meaning of art teaching in the cultural scheme of things has been engraved on the consciousness of every person associated with the Center. We who are part of the Harlem Community Art Center feel the way the editor-in-chief of a well-known Paris newspaper did when he wrote in our guest book: "One goes many places, seeing many things but being little impressed; but here, indeed, one sees a true expression of a New World." With real conviction we add, a new and better world!

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