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Interrupting Trauma with Hope, Kindness, Art and Healing

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Interrupting Trauma with Hope, Kindness, Art and Healing

Cover Page Footnote

Thank you to our amazing artists and supporters. Without you ArtForce Iowa cannot accomplish our mission to transform youth in need through art. Thank you: Johnathan Fusco, Saulaman Schlegel, Kathryn Sutton, Daniel Jaquez Ocha, Juan Lourido, Cody Sherman, Cameron Schneider, Kristian Day, Justin Schneider, Jacob Her, Garnet Nordine, Stephanie Sylvester, Joshua Palmer, Andrea Charlow, Rachel Vogel Quinn, Christine Tran, Matt Scheetz, Allison Jones, Limay Vong, Brian Bonanno, Jazmine Johnson, Rob Stephens, Dan Nutt, Christopher Ford, Jordan Weber, Elizabeth deCleene, Will Bortz, Taylor Yocom, Jami Bassman, Hillary Dickens, Amanda Young, RJ Hernandez, Brian Fredricksen, Kaleena Calcutta-Faux, Niama Hagos, Rusk Dorsett, Anna Lewinmeister, Reiko Cunningham, Paula Egan, Sam McCauley, Dartanyan Brown, Jackson Meister, Claudia Kyalangalilwa, Monserrat Iniguez, Patrick McCready, Austin Broach, Elle Gilmer Contreres, Miguel Contreres, Carl Vieregger, Beth Scheetz, Kevin Hawkinson, Anna Tran, Scott Anderson, Jennifer Leill, Meredith Olson, Alix Sanchez, Sharon Wegner, Ashley Tatum, Naomi Mendez, Melissa Kanost, Amy Parker, Maureen Griffin, Chris Cyran, Lyn Marchant, Sarah Welch, Natalie Scarpino, Rachel Woodhouse, Lisa Cushatt, Teresa Burke, Eric Allan, Brent Pattison and the Honorable Judge Colin Witt. Most importantly, thank you to every youth artist and their caregivers for entrusting us with their safety. It is a privilege to know you and to see you. We love you forever.

Interrupting Trauma with Hope, Kindness, Art, and Healing

Christine M. Her, Yvette Z. Hermann, and Emma K. Parker

ArtForce Iowa is a non-profit organization based in Des Moines, Iowa. Founded in 2012, ArtForce Iowa has a mission to transform youth in need through art. It is pioneering a non-pathologizing approach to working with children in need of services and it offers a critical humanizing perspective using art and music. In this article, seven youth stories provide windows into the troubling, but hopeful, effects of the young people's relationship with their own healing. The article aims to shed light on the promise of authentic kindness, the freedom of art, and the empowerment of youth leadership to support the social and emotional lives of children from marginalized communities.

ArtForce Iowa was conceived by a man who was convicted of attempted murder and terrorism for a drive-by shooting that happened in the summer of 1999 in Des Moines, Iowa. While in prison, this man hand-wrote three manuscripts—a memoir and two novels—inspired and informed by the narrative styles of Philip Roth and Saul Bellows. After his release, he sought the help of an editor for his third manuscript, a novel.

In the writing lab at Des Moines Area Community College (DMACC), he met Yvette Hermann, an adjunct instructor of writing who would later become the ArtForce Iowa Creative Pathways Program Director. At their first meeting, he said, "I wish I could make sure I'm the last Black Kid to discover he's an artist in prison."

Together, he and Yvette set a goal to review 25 manuscript pages per session. They met in person. They debated adjectives and scarcely made small talk—there was too much to do. After they had examined 225 pages, he asked, "Remember when you told me what a teaching artist is? Can you help me with something?" This middle-aged man looked back and saw his younger self: a Black boy who was in and out of juvenile detention, profiled as dangerous, forced into the school-to-prison pipeline, and then served hard time. He realized that if he had had art, if he had had a caring mentor who could advocate for him, his life would have been different. "Could this dream, this place, be reality?"

The Beginnings of ArtForce Iowa

It was then that ArtForce Iowa was born. The 501c3 non-profit organization was first named The Film School, then changed to Iowa Arts-in-Education DBA ArtForce Iowa.

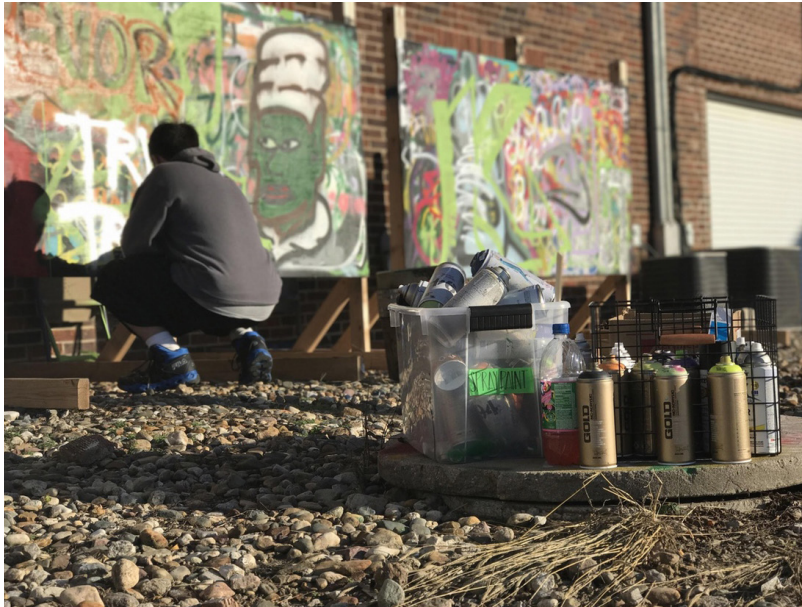


Figure 1. Youth artist tagging in Graffiti Alley at ArtForce Iowa

Art workshops began in 2013, with young people referred through Polk County Department of Juvenile Justice. Youth leadership shaped the program. When young people requested a specific arts discipline, ArtForce Iowa staff and volunteers found professional practicing artists to mentor them. Among the first art forms explored were audio production, rap, street art/graffiti, voice lessons, acting, and video production. Since day one, ArtForce Iowa has been driven by the needs and creative ideas of youth artists who live in high-poverty, high-crime neighborhoods.

Youth artists at ArtForce Iowa have pointed out that the veil of “Iowa Nice” (a label often used to describe the friendliness of people from Iowa) does not extend to the people of color in our state. To the youth artists, people with power in Des Moines appear united in their denial of systemic problems that perpetuate inequality: intergenerational poverty, institutional betrayal, income disparity, implicit bias (specifically in education, government, and social services) and the legacy of White supremacy. According to *The Atlantic*, “[Des Moines is] a city with an [economically] stagnant Black community that accounts for most of the area’s poverty” (Vasilogambros, 2014). Iowa disproportionately incarcerates Black and Brown people (Fineran, 2018). And Iowa is one of just three states that permanently ban all people with a felony conviction from voting (Gruber-Miller & Rodriguez, 2019).

In 2013, ArtForce Iowa established “Creative Pathways” as the name for the supportive arts community program that serves court-involved youth ages 13 to 19. Over the next five years, Creative Pathways’ community of youth artists grew to include court-involved youth aged 12 to 13, youth with five or more behavior referrals in school, and youth involved with the foster care system. ArtForce Iowa recognized that these youth had one thing in common: high levels of adverse childhood experiences and significant trauma. Deficits in connection, attunement, trust, autonomy, and love in their early development taught these highly

functional young people an array of adaptive survival styles that helped them cope with everyday life, and it often took months to build trust (Heller & LaPierre, 2012, p. 5).

Think about it: first these youth suffer from neglect, abuse, self-harm, exposure to crime, violence, and poverty in their histories and environments. Then they are marginalized and demonized by the education and judicial systems as well as the community at large. Some ArtForce Iowa youth artists refer to themselves as “broken.” They have been taught to believe it’s the truth.

In 2016, ArtForce Iowa recognized another community need too big to ignore: youth who are refugees, immigrants, or first-generation American-born who are also victims of crime. In the Des Moines public school system, 61.9 percent of students are non-White (Des Moines Public Schools, 2019), with precious few role models of color among faculty and administration. In response to this need, ArtForce Iowa launched a new program based upon the Creative Pathways program model. This program is called DSM Heroes (DSM is the airport code for Des Moines, Iowa).

ArtForce Iowa Today

Workshops at ArtForce Iowa do not look like classrooms. Workshops look like a group of friends creating art and music together, or a family sharing a meal together (Figure 2). Workshops take place Monday to Thursday from 5:00 PM – 7:00 PM, but youth artists know they can reach out any time, for a ride to a workshop or just to connect. Workshops begin with a free hot meal and an ArtForce family check-in ritual called “highs and lows” in which everyone reflects on positives and negatives in their lives. This helps our community of staff, mentors, and youth artists create and maintain a nonjudgmental environment where everyone feels safe to express what’s on their mind. All workshops are planned with the 25-year evidence base of Self-Determination Theory. This theory maintains that autonomy, competence, and relatedness can foster intrinsic motivation, a characteristic crucial to building resilience in struggling and disempowered young people (Self-Determination Theory, n.d.).



Figure 2. Youth artists enjoy a meal prepared by Chef of the Year, Aaron Holt, at ArtForce Iowa

Both Creative Pathways and DSM Heroes workshops put the wants and needs of the youth artist at the forefront. Artist mentors at ArtForce Iowa ask youth artists, “What would you like to make today?” and lend a helping hand when youth ask for it. Artist mentors are practicing artists trained to use art as a catalyst for communication and connection, to encourage self-expression, self-esteem, hope, and future success. The limitless creative possibilities of art allow young people to express their feelings without having to talk (Van der Kolk, 2014, pp. 244-245).

Adults who work with children in schools and other contexts may have peculiar expectations, perhaps based upon their own schooling. They expect young people to arrive at school nourished and well-rested. They expect young people to be happy to submit to the demands of the school day: sitting where they are assigned, doing what they are told, and submitting to authority no matter what. We are not here to say why this is unreasonable. We are here to say these expectations are hurting our children, who should find joy in learning. The youth ArtForce Iowa serves are sometimes victims of grave injustices, or scared, or hungry. They may not have the words to express their needs or fears. Instead of being identified as in need of loving support, they may be labeled as disruptive (or worse). The secret curriculum they are learning is, “You are not good enough and we don’t want you here.” This lesson can follow someone for a lifetime.

At ArtForce Iowa, it is our mission to transform youth in need through art. Young people who engage with ArtForce Iowa report increased self-esteem and quality of life. They return over and over because they feel safe from judgment, away from adults who are “trying to get them in trouble.” We see reduced recidivism. High engagement rates. High graduation rates. Connections with positive adults appear to make the difference for disconnected young people.

Our Collective Stories: #KNOWJUSTICE

Every year in May, ArtForce Iowa youth artists have the opportunity to share their work with the community in a multimedia art exhibit: #KNOWJUSTICE. We bond together and with community supporters to explore difficult topics and create meaningful art together. Thematic exploration begins early in the year in partnership with Drake University Law School, sponsored by the Slay Fund. Brent Pattison, Director of the Middleton Center for Children’s Rights at Drake University Law School, says,

My clients often feel unwelcome at school, under scrutiny in Juvenile Court, and sometimes even disconnected from their families. When they go to ArtForce Iowa, they are welcomed, respected, and cared about... they instantly find a safe and supportive community where they can learn new ways to express who they are through art.

Pattison adds that the #KNOWJUSTICE partnership is valuable for his students because they learn to build rapport with young people, in addition to providing legal representation. Law school students, artist mentors, and youth artists learn about social justice issues from each other in presentation, informal conversation, and while art-making in the months leading up to the exhibit. Youth artists conceive and create art in collaboration or solo: songs, poems, paintings, textile art, sculptures, installations, documentaries. Youth artists have chosen to use court documents, shackles, and broken glass in their art, a sign of healing being actively chosen and pursued.

All of the art pictured in this article was initiated in search of the answer to the question: “What is justice?” and featured in a #KNOWJUSTICE exhibit. We invite you to wonder: What is justice to you? What would your art look like based on your life experiences?

ArtForce Iowa will launch the sixth annual #KNOWJUSTICE: Know Change art exhibit on May 7, 2020 in Des Moines, IA. ArtForce Iowa and #KNOWJUSTICE aim to end the cycle of not being heard, of being pre-judged based upon your past or physical appearance, of living out the life that poverty prescribes. The success of #KNOWJUSTICE is not in fundraising or even community-consciousness-raising (yet). The success is in the prolonged creative effort of young people who have been taught not to try. The success is in their conversations and their self-perception as independent beings with influential thoughts and feelings about important issues. Youth artists have a lot to tell us about justice, personal power, and the world. In the following section, we offer profiles of several ArtForce Iowa youth artists. Their stories and their artworks speak for themselves.

Case Studies/Stories

Youth artist, songwriter, rapper: TWW

TWW was born in South Sudan and moved with his parents to Iowa when he was 1 year old. He has lived in Des Moines all of his life. ArtForce Iowa met T when he was referred to the Creative Pathways program by his Juvenile Court Officer (JCO, the juvenile equivalent of a probation officer). The first day we picked him up at his high school for workshop, he was bleeding from cuts near his eye and mouth. Someone had jumped him. He was casual about it: “Don’t worry... it happens all the time... it’s chill.” T shared that he often crashed at friends’ houses rather than sleeping at home.

T was not a big talker, but his writing talent emerged during a workshop and caused excitement among the ArtForce family. The voice, the rhythm, the rhyme, the truthful and revealing lines of poetry were already music. He began to smile and laugh more often and talked about studying music theory in college. His first instrumental composition begins and ends with a metronome, weaving boredom with fantasy. Listen to: **“Bleh”**



Figure 3. T practicing guitar.

T worked in the recording studio on spoken word poetry and rap while studying the ukulele and bass guitar with an ArtForce Iowa mentor. His lyrics referenced a search for stability amid street violence, social apathy,

and immersion in drug culture. He released a track for exhibit at #KNOWJUSTICE: *Finding Home* (Day & D, 2017) and moderated a panel of police officers, lawyers, and juvenile court officers at #KNOWJUSTICE: *Manifesto*. Listen to his track: **"To the Sky."** Research during his songwriting process inspired him to take on a modern rap opera, and he began to shape a mixtape that told the story of Bobby, an "everyboy" left to his own devices to survive.

We were with T to celebrate his case closing in juvenile court. Then, something happened. ArtForce Iowa mentors reached out to him and tried to ensure he knew ArtForce would always be a safe place for him. No answer. Months later, T informed us he had been kicked out of his house by his mother on his 18th birthday. He could no longer rely on his best friend. He had stopped going to school. T said that he needed access to health care and a place to stay. He opened up to us about his depression. T's pain was palpable and evident in his face, his voice, his gait. We listened to him, heard him, offered support, and gently suggested he seek mental health services. T has good reason to be skeptical of support that is not his own idea, and he turned down clinical help. He did accept a ride to a local shelter, and we didn't hear from him for a few months.

TWW is on his own now. He graduated from high school with an equivalency diploma in December 2018. He works at a sandwich shop, goes to community college, and lives in an apartment. He still has no contact with his parents. His visits to ArtForce Iowa are unpredictable and infrequent, but always focused on his music. Listen to: **"Bobby's Story."**

Youth artist, "lady boss," sculptor, illustrator: D

D was 6 years old when she came to America, a Karen (Kuh-REN) refugee born in a refugee camp in Thailand. In Des Moines, her family's apartment complex hallways smelled like food garbage and the parking lot is unpaved, littered, and directly across the street from the United Way of Central Iowa and a community college campus. She shares a bedroom with five other people. D walks five blocks to catch a public bus every day, even in below freezing weather. She lives on one of the busiest corridors in the metro nearly two miles from school. The school district's policy states she lives close enough to walk.

She is a quick learner who will take any opportunity to avoid the spotlight. D lacked confidence when she came to us. In workshops, she would often stop creating things and claim that it was "too hard." Her posture was slouched forward and her gaze was usually downcast. We quickly learned that she views things in an abstract way. With our encouragement, she has created some beautiful and intricate pieces, working in sculpture, colored pencil, origami, graphite, watercolor, and embroidery, to name a few. D has blossomed into a hilariously charming, candid individual: "Miss, are you going to drive into that pothole again today?" With a big smile and giddy laugh: "Those glasses look good on you, but you should get contacts."

Seeing that she was uncomfortable with her body and often called herself "ugly" or "fat," a female artist mentor told D, "You're not fat." That weekend, the same artist mentor helped her find a bra that fit her. We saw a change in her posture and confidence almost immediately, and the "lady boss" began to emerge.

During the spring of 2017, with the help of artist-in-residence and filmmaker Kristian Day, D wrote and directed a short film about domestic abuse that presents ArtForce Iowa as a safe place for anyone experiencing current or past trauma. Watch D's video: **"Finding Home."** She collaborated with Kristian on the direction of the video, and included other youth artists.

D's first sculpture, "Decemberland," is a tabletop art installation of found materials (shells, twigs, rocks, leaves, and recycled food packaging) representing a truly multicultural neighborhood block with homes

that resemble caves, huts, and high-rises. ArtForce Iowa staff noticed her interest in architecture and perspective drawing, and introduced her to an architect who helped reinforce her passion. D created two three-dimensional models of her apartment complex (Figures 4 and 5). The “Present” shows littered trash, dirt patches, broken concrete, a ruined children’s playset, parking lots without parking lines, large potholes, and wrecked dumpsters. The second scale model, the “Future,” has apple trees, a community garden, benches, a swing set, lined parking lots, and working dumpsters.

D is now a project manager in her own right, enlisting the help of artist mentors in order to create her more labor-intensive pieces.



Figure 4. Detail of “Present,” *Present & Future*. Artist Statement: “Where I live looks trashy and I want to make it better.” Sculpture by D in Des Moines, IA. April 2018



Figure 5. Detail of “Future,” *Present & Future*. Sculpture by D in Des Moines, IA. April 2018

The partnership of youth artist, composer, rapper, audio producer: L and youth artist, actor, singer, filmmaker: M

L and M are the first youth artists in separate programs (Creative Pathways and DSM Heroes) to collaborate together at ArtForce Iowa. When L, from the south side of Des Moines, and M, living on the north side, met at ArtForce Iowa in the summer of 2018, they wanted nothing to do with one another. They shared a dislike for the ArtForce tradition of “highs and lows” in group workshop, because neither was comfortable expressing themselves in English. M would watch L say hello to the group and bolt upstairs to the recording studio, where he would emit thumping electronic bass beats for 90 minutes. M was fascinated but intimidated by the recording studio, and one day he asked L if he could watch him make music. Take a journey through their process:

HIT_1. First solo composition by L, January 2017.

MB BEAT 2 draft. First collaborative composition by L and M, April 2018.

Tk. First solo performance by M, mastered by L, March 2019.

MB. Collaborative composition by L and M, April 2019.

L, a youth artist with a history of arrests for fighting and gun possession, and M, a youth artist who escaped genocide in his home country, learned they spoke the common language of music. ArtForce Iowa staff learned a lesson from their collaboration: the language of art can bridge differences in background or history and render those differences inconsequential.

Youth artist, philosopher, visual artist, creative writer: RM

RM joined ArtForce Iowa in the fall of 2018. He is a 17-year-old Karen refugee who came to America from a refugee camp in Thailand when he was 5 and a half years old. RM is unapologetically himself. In no time, he found his niche as a creative writer and visual artist. RM consistently explores new artistic forms such as guitar, singing, acting, and playwriting. His creating process allows him to share his philosophies: “It is simple to be kind. But so hard, too.” He has been an ArtForce Iowa ambassador, making sure every new youth artist and artist mentor feels welcomed and heard.

The artwork he produced for #KNOWJUSTICE: *Origins* captures who RM is as a young adult navigating his way through his life. “The Maze of Life” (Figures 6 and 7) presents the viewer with specific hardships and celebrations that one might experience from birth to death.



Figure 6. The Maze of Life. Artist Statement: "The Maze of Life is more than a maze game. The making of this maze took time and patience just like growing in this life. As we build to our goal, sometimes we need others' help to reach our goal. This maze represents the choices we make in life. You can choose your own path, but some can be difficult."
Sculpture by RM in Des Moines, IA. May 2019



Figure 7. Troubles can make us feel down. Detail of sculpture by RM in Des Moines, IA. May 2019

One day during ArtForce Iowa's daily ritual of "highs and lows" RM lowered his head and said quietly, "Sometimes I think of things that are not so great." When he raised his eyes, he saw acceptance from the community. He realized no one had judged him and no one needed more information. He felt safe. Now he often shares that he struggles with his brain. This internal struggle is evident in "Hero" (Figure 8). RM's gritty use of charcoal makes the viewer question what the young artist is feeling. The two pieces capture that he is philosophical and hopeful, while acknowledging that life is a mighty struggle.



Figure 8. *Hero*. Charcoal and pastel on paper by RM in Des Moines, IA. May 2019

Youth artist, songwriter, singer, painter: XZ

XZ grew up in the foster care system. Her foster parents adopted, abused, and neglected her and another adopted child. She was locked in a basement every day after school and all weekend. She was often fed crushed granola bars or expired soup. X started getting in trouble in school when she tried to tell other adults about her situation at home. Finally, when she was 13, she got the attention of a teacher. She was removed from the adoptive parents' home and placed in a youth shelter, where she was connected with ArtForce Iowa staff.

At ArtForce Iowa, XZ was initially a quiet presence, painting or writing fiction with headphones on. She began to play piano with an artist mentor's encouragement, setting her words to music. She was inspired to write about romantic relationships, the good and the bad parts. She has trusted ArtForce Iowa mentors to join her for her staffing meetings and at therapy appointments. She went through periods of calm, focused on painting or writing. She met a therapist who recognized her traumatic history and knew she would not feel safe until she lived in a home with caring adults. This therapist became her foster mom. Both XZ and her new foster family leaned on ArtForce Iowa when they needed support after misunderstandings or panic attacks.



Figure 9. *Take Me Home*. Paint on canvas by XZ in Des Moines, IA. May 2016

Sometimes XZ attended ArtForce workshops three times a week, sometimes not at all. Her favorite workshops were the ones where she could decide between painting, singing, or songwriting, depending on the kind of day she had had so far. Her first painting (Figure 9) showed incredible promise and intuition, in both its theme and its process. XZ told her mentor, “I didn’t use a brush because I just wanted it to be me and paint.”



Figure 10. *Blue Girl*. Paint on canvas by XZ in Des Moines, IA. May 2017

Working alongside other youth artists, her painting style evolved, and she created a series of larger-than-life portraits of women. The paintings sold so quickly we only have a photograph of *Blue Girl* (Figure 10).

XZ loved music just as much as painting, but she struggled with piano because of a wrist injury that hadn't healed properly. She learned to play chords slowly, with lots of air between each. Her playing technique informed her songwriting. Her first song, still a demo version, is haunting and emotional. Listen to **"Belladonna,"** written and performed by XZ in 2017.

From the day that XZ left her abusive home, she began healing. Today, she has graduated from high school, lives with her boyfriend in an apartment downtown, works part-time, and manages her lawsuit against the system and the people who caused her so much harm.

ArtForce Iowa and Trauma

ArtForce Iowa aims to end the cycle of unrecognized trauma. We wish for a world in which everyone and every institution seeks to lift up struggling people with nurturing support. ArtForce Iowa and other safe creative spaces for youth offer art opportunities and creative freedom, but we still have to send these youth back into a White supremacist culture every day. Here are some of the experiences our youth have shared with us:

- EM, a 16-year-old refugee from Burma was not issued a locker at her high school. The school support staff said, "Everyone gets a locker. She just didn't know she had one because she doesn't speak English." EM had learned conversational English at the age of 9 as a child worker in Malaysia, where she was the sole provider for her family of five. She learned how to read and write in English when she came to America at the age of 14.
- VF, a 12-year-old told by his teacher, "You're just another bad Black boy."
- KG, a 15-year-old girl, spent two hours each way on the school bus because she lived at a shelter and had to be the first one picked up and the last one dropped off.
- Middle schoolers having a private conversation at school are told to speak English.
- ArtForce Iowa girls feel less safe on the streets of Des Moines in the wake of the 2016 presidential election because of their religion and ethnicity.
- H, a 15-year-old girl, reports cyber sexual harassment from the safety of ArtForce Iowa. The police tell her there's nothing they can do, then visit her home address unannounced (and without a translator) while she is at school the next day. Her mother panics because of the confusion.

Well-meaning adults with privilege often have no idea that they are perpetuating oppression with their actions and word choices. To better understand the negative impacts caused by repeated micro-aggressions and psychological trauma, we must recognize that poverty, racism, genocide, and systemic oppression (such as redlining and mass incarceration) are traumatic. Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs) work must be expanded to include the above and more factors. We know through Iowa ACEs 360 research (Original ACE Study, n.d.) that connection with positive adults can reduce or mitigate the negative health effects of multiple ACEs. We also need to do the work to reduce the unchecked growth in occurrence of these adverse experiences and the harmful labels that result.

For example, "trauma-informed care" principles have been adopted by some progressive schools and youth-centered environments to prevent re-traumatization. We applaud their efforts to support struggling students, but the term "trauma-informed" pathologizes and disempowers. "Healing-centered engagement"

is the term offered by Shawn Ginwright (2018), author of *Hope and Healing in Urban Education: How Activists are Reclaiming Matters of the Heart*.

When we reflect on our practices at ArtForce Iowa, we look not through the lens of intention, but through impact. Did we help? Can we help? How can we support without interfering or imposing our values? How can we provide a safe space that leads to self-healing? How can we move forward without falling into the role of “savior?” How can we be mindful of any and all pathologizing and blaming behavior and language biases? How can we empower our youth artists to “play the game” well enough to thrive without surrendering their values? At ArtForce Iowa, we know we are not healers and we don’t claim to be. We try our best to create a safe culture centered around self-healing. We strive to give youth artists space to reclaim their own power.

Towards Healing

ArtForce Iowa results so far include: reduced recidivism; high engagement rates; high graduation rates; self-reports of increased self-esteem and quality of life; and high marks in an external program evaluation that assesses safety, support, interaction, engagement, youth-centeredness, and access. Connections matter. Healing is often described as a personal journey, but we find that building authentic resilience requires the support of a life-affirming community as well as the removal of immediate threats to safety and well-being.

We can’t (and shouldn’t) try to erase or even heal traumatic wounds. Licensed therapists and counselors who understand ACEs are actively moving from using the language, “What’s wrong?” to “What’s happened to you?” but we are not counselors or therapists. We are careful to avoid asking for trauma disclosures, instead leading with “What kind of artist are you?”

But what do we do when a child spontaneously shares something troubling? Are they looking for help or an empathetic ear? When do we escalate to families or authorities? What are the consequences of sharing this information? We don’t have all the answers, so we don’t work in isolation. We work as a family team and we know what motivates us: interrupting trauma with hope, kindness, art, and opportunity.

Acknowledgments

Thank you to our amazing artists and supporters. Without you, ArtForce Iowa cannot accomplish our mission to transform youth in need through art.

Most importantly, thank you to every youth artist and their caregivers for entrusting us with their safety. It is a privilege to know you and to see you. We love you forever.

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About the Authors



Christine Her is the Executive Director of ArtForce Iowa. Christine is the daughter of Hmong refugee parents from Laos and a Des Moines native. She graduated from East High School and pursued her BA at Drake University. She is highly motivated to interrupt social and systemic injustices with hope and opportunity.



Yvette Zaród Hermann is the Arts Outreach Educator at ArtForce Iowa. Yvette is a passionate advocate for the rights of young people. As a New York City Teaching Fellow, Yvette earned her Master's of Science in Education from CUNY Lehman College while teaching English Language Arts in a public high school in the Bronx. She has 13 years of classroom teaching experience and her favorite projects involve poetry, dance, and theatre.



Emma Parker is the DSM Heroes Program Director at ArtForce Iowa. Emma is a visual artist with a talent for envisioning collaborative projects. She graduated from Iowa State University with a BFA in Studio Art.

Staff portraits: Watercolor on paper by youth artist SP.