

Venice Arts: Celebrating 25 Years

Igniting possibility, expanding creativity and transforming lives

BY ELYSA VOSHELL • PHOTOS COURTESY OF VENICE ARTS




In 1992, soon after the civil unrest in Los Angeles, and after one of what were to be many cuts to arts education in Los Angeles' public schools, a group of Venice residents—artists, business people, and other community members—came together to figure out how to link Venice's then-large community of emerging and established artists with the significant number of kids living in poverty. Their dream was to create a vibrant, neighborhood arts center open to the whole community, but with a core commitment to nurturing creativity and possibility in the lives of young people. In 1993, Venice Arts was born.

This year, Venice Arts celebrates its 25th Anniversary, under the visionary leadership of our Founder and Executive Director, Lynn Warshafsky, a longtime Venice resident and lifelong believer in the power of creativity and storytelling. Venice Arts now serves over 450 low-income young people each year through our core, media-arts based Art Mentoring & Education Program, which develops the next generation of storytellers and visual media artists; readies youth for college acceptance and creative careers; and inspires in them a belief in their own potential. We also engage a broad community at our gallery—through exhibitions, screenings, and public programs; and consult and train others interested in our model around the world. Since community demand has far exceeded our current capacities, we have also, reluctantly, turned away approximately 150 low-income youth annually. However, with a move last year to a new facility that doubles our size, we are poised to grow our community support, expand our programs, and deepen our impacts.

I moved to Los Angeles from Philadelphia in 2009 to work with Venice Arts, thrilled to have found a place where I could bring together my interrelated passions: my belief in the transformative power of the arts and creative expression, particularly for marginalized young people; my interest in fostering an environment that links artists with audiences for their work; and my deep commitment to building social justice and expanding cultural equity through arts engagement for people of all ages.

In my nine years at Venice Arts I've had the privilege of personally getting to know some of the many hundreds of youth people who have moved through our program. I've seen them grow as young artists and young humans; find their voice as they develop their photography, filmmaking, and animation skills; win life-changing local, statewide, and national awards for their work—including a Presidential Scholar in the Arts; become the first in their families to attend college; and return to this special place that has become their home-away-from-home in order to intern or to mentor other youth. Itenite, one of our 12-year-old students, said it best: "This place is to make your dreams come true, to open up and become who you want to be in the future." As we celebrate our 25th anniversary, I am excited for what the future will bring, for Venice Arts, our students, and our wider community.

Elysa Voshell is the Associate Director at Venice Arts.

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