

Community News

Sculpture Project Turns Kids On To Art

Huntington artist reaps the rewards of art therapy in the classroom

By Joanne Kountourakis

It sounds like one of those overbearingly popular movie clichés: a suburban-bred teacher in an inner city school treated, at first, like the outsider he is.

Soon enough, he's accepted by his students, who have traded in a history of misbehavior and crime for a shot at an education and a chance to turn their lives around.

But those happy endings only happen on the big screen, right?

Not for Erich J. Preis, a Halesite resident and art educator who was met at the School for Social Change in the South Bronx with a barrage of obstacles. Preis said he was greeted with threats, weapons and, on his very first day, an iceball thrown at his classroom window.

"They put me in the worst school and they basically expected me to fail," said the 28-year-old artist and teacher.

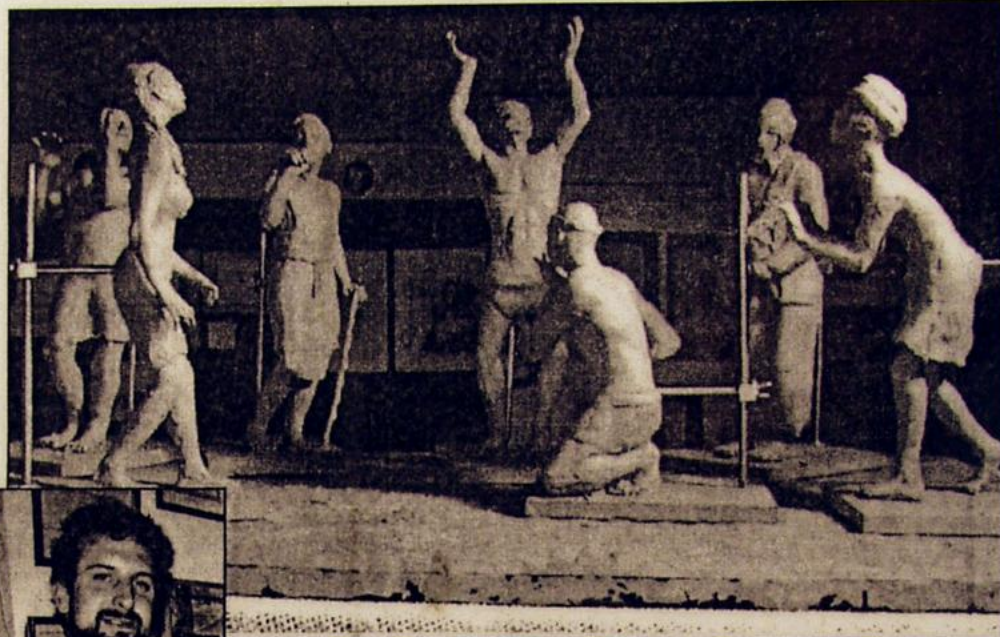
In the face of adversity, Preis sought — and eventually found — refuge in his background of art therapy. "I knew if I was going to make it, I was going to have to use everything I learned in art therapy," he said.

Preis himself had seen how art quenched the emotional needs in his life and thought that he too could get through to his students if he added a twist to his high school's agenda.

He didn't have to search hard for a vision. Inspired by Auguste Rodin's "Burghers of Calais," Preis sketched a group of figures representing religious figures, both male and female, from around the world. From a Jewish leader to a Protestant, Muslim, Catholic and Buddhist, each figure is in a different pose to represent individuality. Yet the group stands near one another in mutual agreement, showing that peace can exist despite differences in nationality, race and religion.

In his vision, the Multi-Cultural Sculpture project, Preis' students would form clay figures to make a three-dimensional model of the sketch.

When Preis first joined the School for Social Change, he was assigned approximately 30 students. Many of them were the most difficult students in the building, including, said Preis, a well-known and popular 17-



Originally envisioned by Halesite resident and artist/educator Erich J. Preis (Inset), the Multi-Cultural Sculpture project, above, was turned into reality after students from the School for Social Change in the South Bronx, a school with a reputation for violence, formed clay figures to make a three-dimensional model of Preis' sketch.

year-old with a history of hostility and gang affiliation.

Preis said that once he won that particular youngster over, his classmates followed suit. "It was definitely the turning point," he said.

No one could have anticipated the progress Preis would make in four short months. In what would seem to be a fateful succession of events, the class sculpture project has been funded and completed. It is currently decorating the superintendent's office in a district that was at first hesitant to accept Preis and his practice.

And, to Preis' delight, he has demonstrated the power of art to change kids. The project, he said, became the reason his students came to school. It taught them the value of education and the benefits of working together, he said.

To understand his belief in art therapy, Preis revisits his own accomplishments since a learning disability threatened to shortchange him of an education.

Diagnosed with dyslexia when he was a young child, Preis wasn't expected to graduate from high school. A member of Harborfields' class of 1992, Preis defied the odds and went on to get his associate's degree in fine arts from the Fashion Institute of Technology in Manhattan. On a partial scholarship, he was then immersed in an intensive figurative program at the Pennsylvania Academy of Fine Arts, going on to study art therapy at C.W. Post. It was through the philosophy of art therapy that Preis himself was able to confront the emotions of his childhood adoption, and of his learning disabilities. "I guess the psychology got me in touch with my own art," he said. "I'm extremely happy that I went for a bachelor's in art therapy," said Preis, who attributes his success at Post to the help he received from the college's academic resource center. "It gave me the tutoring skills I needed and the courage to believe in myself."

Preis had been studying art since he was 9 years old, when he began taking classes at the Huntington School of Fine Arts under the guidance of director Joe Mack. By the time he was 12, Preis began drawing the figure. He hasn't stopped since.

Recently, Preis visited Mack to show the veteran teacher his most recent work, a series of oversized 20th century paintings concentrating on the intertwined themes of technology and isolationism. On that visit, Mack offered Preis a job teaching drawing and painting

at the Huntington school. Preis didn't hesitate to say yes.

It's a matter of good timing for Preis, who will be out of his job in the South Bronx when the school shuts down at the end of June.

The kids in Preis' class won't be forgotten.

On July 7, close to 30 students from Preis' class will be brought from the Bronx to Huntington, where they will receive recognition for their project at the Thatched Cottage in Centerport, thanks to the owner Ralph Colamussi and town officials who willingly offered to lend a hand.

Funding to produce the mold for the project came through happenstance when Steve Shovers, a fellow educator, discovered Preis' sketchbook on the subway where the teacher had inadvertently left it behind. In it were all of Preis' plans for the project. After it was returned, Preis took Shovers to dinner to thank him. He detailed the project to Shovers, who by meal's end, decided to help monetarily.

"I'm just so excited," said Preis from his Halesite apartment and studio.

He and his students hope to use their project as a memorial to their school and a testament to the fact that, even in life's most difficult situations, art can bring a world together.

It's a lesson Preis learned a while ago and hopes to carry on. He is currently looking for grant money so that he may bring his teaching of violence prevention and conflict resolution through art to Long Island, where he would like to run four- to six-week art projects at various high schools at no cost to the school districts.

An auction scheduled for 1 to 5 p.m. on June 16 at Preis' Halesite apartment, located at 202 East Shore Road, just north of the Halesite Fire Department, will raise much-needed funding to complete the Multi-Cultural Sculpture project and for a digital art portfolio. The proceeds from all of Preis' work sold will go directly to his cause.

"I've accomplished amazing things myself, but I don't care anymore," he said. "I just want to help kids. I want to make that my life."

To learn more about the Multi-Cultural Sculpture Project, or to view Erich Preis' own work, visit www.geocities.com/ejpreis. Call 631-271-7646 for information about the upcoming events.



One of Preis' students works on the detail of a woman's figure as part of the Multi-Cultural Sculpture project.