

One Meeting's Inner-City Art Ministry

by Esther Mürer

based on interviews with Minnie Jane, John Grauer, and Joyce Halley

Frankford Particular Meeting, at Unity and Walnut Streets in northeast Philadelphia, is the oldest meeting in Philadelphia. Frankford was originally settled by Swedes and Dutch. Quakers came there early, and the neighborhood has been peacefully integrated since the late eighteenth century. Since the 1930s it has been increasingly depressed. Frankford Avenue divides it socially and economically; Frankford Orthodox MM, to the west, is in a largely blue-collar area; the area to the east, where Unity and Waln is located, is the second largest welfare community in Philadelphia.

The meeting, although 300 years old, has been under the care of Green St. MM for the last hundred years or so. Ten years ago Joyce Halley, the clerk, was the only member and faithfully attended meeting for worship by herself. Today it has more than a dozen active members and attenders, and holds its meetings for worship on two Friday evenings a month, followed by social hour and discussion.

The meeting shares its space with the Northeast Community Mental Health/Mental Retardation Center during the week. The meeting is also active in neighborhood coalitions for human relations and works with other churches to feed the homeless.

Now they have started their very own art project. They received \$4000 from the Longstreth Fund, earmarked "to be spent on children", and puzzled how best to use it. Minnie Jane, a member of Trenton MM but regular Friday night attender at Unity and Waln, suggested that rather than giving it away they use it to run a series of art classes for the children in the neighborhood. The teachers would be paid a modest amount and eventually the teaching would be turned over to people in the community.

The meeting liked the idea. Minnie Jane held two experimental classes at the meetinghouse in May 1997, then called in John Grauer, a painter and member of Willistown MM. They held classes on two Saturday mornings a month from September 1997 to June 1998. Since some of the children wouldn't have had breakfast, the classes included a snack.

John says: "I treat the kids as individual painters. Although the work is spontaneous, there is always a learning element. I bring work by well-known painters to show. The kids work with water color.

"I divide the time between inside and outside of meetinghouse. As a memory exercise I have the children go out and walk around, observing the surroundings—whether the greenery of the meetinghouse grounds or the cityscape—and then come back inside and do a painting from memory. The kids are learning how to see."

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Another exercise is to cup their hands together to make "viewfinder." Using their hands as a frame they "take pictures", from close up and far away. They pick up a small object such as a leaf or twig, look at the distant vista and hold up the small object against it. Then they bring the small object back into the meetinghouse, draw it and add the background from memory.

In the course of the year there were guest teachers as well: editorial cartoonist Signe Wilkinson gave a class, and a ceramicist brought and demonstrated a potter's wheel.

Other members of the meeting help with snacks and sometimes participate in the art work. The parents tend to be too frightened by the unfamiliar setting to join in. But they did come in June, when a party was held for them and the artwork displayed in the meetinghouse.

The meeting has received a grant from Philadelphia YM's Chace Fund for the program's second year, and is holding the Longstreth money in reserve. They hope to make the classes more truly a neighborhood project by hiring a local artist from the community to take over the teaching. They also plan to pay a few of the program's "veterans" a modest amount to serve as teaching assistants.

When a local teacher is found, Minnie Jane and John hope to start a similar project at another meeting. They see these classes as modeling a way for meetings, particularly those in inner-city neighborhoods, to reach out into their communities.

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