

Building Up the Arts

A multimillion-dollar gift will help support the Stockyard Institute and visual art teacher education at DePaul

Jim Duignan, community gardener Shelly Hope and educator Lavie Raven discuss outdoor arts programming near a mural by Raven and Rahmaan Statik.

A citywide arts initiative that works with underresourced communities will be able to widen its reach thanks to a generous new gift. The Stockyard Institute, described by its leaders as a “social practice project that uses relationships as the material,” was founded 25 years ago by Jim Duignan, an artist, associate professor, and founder and chair of the college’s Visual Art Education program. DePaul received \$3 million in gifts from the Weitz Family Foundation of Omaha and the estate of the late Justina Tzeng to benefit and expand the Stockyard Institute program and visual art teacher education, with another \$2 million expected through a matching gift challenge issued by the Weitz Family Foundation. Weitz Foundation Executive Director Katie Weitz, PhD (MEd ’99), studied under Duignan, and the two have continued collaborating over the years.

Weitz says that the foundation’s gift is designed to help Stockyard Institute continue its unique approach to social justice. “DePaul is a social justice institution, and I think the way that the Stockyard Institute interacts with aspiring teachers, as well as students, is really in the mode of social justice,” says Weitz. “What we hope is that this gift helps continue Jim’s legacy of communicating and challenging people to think differently and to understand their ability to produce and make meaning out of their lives in ways that can touch other people.”

The funding, Duignan hopes, will benefit countless neighborhood art projects in Chicago.

In 1995, Duignan designed an arts program in a new, experimental middle school, San

Miguel School Chicago, in the Back of the Yards neighborhood. He had the freedom to teach his 10 students, who had dropped out of other schools, in any way he chose. He decided to let the students, who were all touched by gang activity, set the tone. They came up with their own questions based on how they perceived the city and explored those questions through art. In addition to learning about inquiry and materials, they also formed strong relationships with each other and with their own neighborhood.

“When we got to know each other really well, one of the kids said to me that his biggest fear was being shot in the back accidentally on his way to school,” says Duignan. “So we quickly devised this idea that we could be a design collective. We could be a group of individuals who worked together, exploring a project or proposal or anything.” The result? The class designed a fully armor-plated outfit that could withstand stray gunfire. They called it a gangproof suit.

Stockyard Institute would take on a life of its own as Duignan found opportunities to work with schools, community centers, cultural organizations and artists in other historically neglected neighborhoods like Austin and North Lawndale. Over the years, the projects, which are chosen by the community and designed to foster a sense of creative pride and togetherness, have led to gallery exhibits, publications, performances, educational events, radio broadcasts and several student-led and community-driven radio stations.

Even as the founder of Stockyard Institute, Duignan admits that it’s challenging to fully describe the initiative. It’s a far cry from a

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traditional art program, where students are taught technical skills and you can count the number of participants. As an artists' project, Stockyard Institute aims to be a catalyst that sparks and carries creative energy from one person to another, bringing together a collaborative network of artists, teachers and other cultural workers from all corners of the city to effect civic change.

Faculty member Rachel Harper, who is Stockyard Institute's assistant director and an artist, says Stockyard Institute is unique in its flexibility. Rather than aiming to mold students to fit within an existing framework, the framework itself responds to the students and the neighborhood through creativity and connection. "People often only approach Chicago neighborhoods as places that need to be fixed. The tradition of Stockyard Institute has been about really knowing neighborhoods and understanding that each community is rich with cultural and educational methods that are natural to individuals and families," she says. When Stockyard Institute goes into a neighborhood, says Harper, "the neighborhood is the program."

Lavie Raven (EDU '96) says Duignan was one of his mentors at DePaul and describes him as an arts activist, or an "artist." "He's an artist, and he's active in the community and putting out the goods in some ways. When I say the goods I mean, let's create. What do you want to make? What does the community want to do? Let me see if I can get it," says Raven, who is a Fulbright Distinguished Teacher, an English and social studies teacher at Oak Park and River Forest



Photo by Michelle Litvin

Collaborators convene to plan "Pedagogical Factory," a community arts series at the Hyde Park Art Center, where Duignan brought Stockyard Institute-inspired programming in 2007.



Duignan and Rachel Harper highlight community assets in partnership initiatives.

High School, a lecturer at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago, and co-founder of the University of Hip Hop, an interdisciplinary school of street art.

When Raven thinks about Duignan's work and his influence, he thinks about wildflower seeds that sprout and spread in overlooked communities. He says, "Jim sowed those seeds, and now you're seeing those seeds actually come back and say, 'We appreciate the relationship you created and the presence you offered and the things that you did. Let's do it again. Let's do it bigger.'"