Using ART to AMPLIFY Youth Voices on Housing Insecurity

Carolyn Cannuscio, ScD, Eva Bugos, Shari Horsh, MFA, David A. Asch, MD, MBA, and Eve E. Weiss, MS

PHILADELPHIA, PENNSYLVANIA, is a city of contradictions. Just beyond its vibrant and thriving downtown, Philadelphia’s disadvantaged neighborhoods seem forlorn and forgotten, with too few people and too many broken windows. Philadelphia has 40,000 vacant and abandoned properties but more than 5,000 homeless children.1,2

Acting on the conviction that “art ignites change,” the Mural Arts Program of Philadelphia launched the arts and advocacy initiative A Place to Call Home. The project’s mission was to engage and empower high-risk young people, giving voice to their concerns about housing and health. The project engaged the community along with the youth participants, whose personal stories of housing insecurity and homelessness inspired provocative art aimed at making their invisible suffering a public concern.

At the start of the project, our team of researchers and artists was warned not to expect the same youth participants to show up week after week. The life challenges they face are too great, we were told, to allow for sustained participation.

The participants defied those expectations: 48 young people, ages 14 to 23, worked consistently for six months, engaging in neighborhood photo documentation,2 photo-elicitation interviews4 regarding their own housing struggles, and the creation of public art. The youth participants also received housing and employment counseling. To the surprise of team leaders, the young people promptly became effective advocates by recruiting additional friends in need of help. The only resistance came from a small group of residents near the project site, who initially questioned the motives of the team.

IMAGE 1—An abandoned row house was donated by a local developer and transformed into an Art House for A Place to Call Home. The house also served as a base for distributing information about housing, legal aid, health care, and employment. Photograph by S. Weinik.

“Acting on the conviction that ‘art ignites change,’ the Mural Arts Program of Philadelphia launched the arts and advocacy initiative A Place to Call Home.”
The youth participants—several of whom were accustomed to the negative attention of the criminal justice system—proudly attended the project exhibition. They brought adult family members, friends, and their own children to see the work they had helped to create. The audience included city council members, reporters, local residents, nonprofit leaders, and Mayor Michael Nutter, who announced his commitment to ending homelessness in Philadelphia.

The exhibit centered on a strikingly painted Art House, reclaimed from its former role as a crack house (Image 1). Just inside was a paper sculpture by Ernel Martinez, who used the transcripts from young people’s photo-elicitation interviews to craft a dining table, chairs, and dinnerware (Image 2). Wallpaper incorporated words from the transcripts into whimsical, swirling flowers and vines, a deliberate contrast to what he called the heavy stories about being kicked out of homes, “couch surfing,” or living in shelters. In the next room and upstairs, visitors watched stop-motion animations by Damon Reaves (http://www.damonreaves.com/rowxhtml) and heard an audio mural by Elizabeth Perez Luna from the local National Public Radio affiliate, WHYY (http://www.newsworks.org/index.php/a-place-to-call-home).

To spark conversations in the neighborhood, artist Shira Wainsky emblazoned nearby blocks with arresting images on the sides of row homes (Image 3). She also installed “gacilla murals” and wheat-pasted prints on abandoned buildings, often to cover graffiti or boarded windows and always to focus attention on the universal importance of home (Image 4).

IMAGE 1—Visitors to the Art House wanted to sit at this table, sculpted from young people’s interview transcripts by Ernel Martinez. But the set itself was intentionally fragile—reflecting the instability and insecurity Martinez heard in so many of the young people’s descriptions of their homes. Photograph by S. Weinik.

IMAGE 3—With vibrant colors and icons of domestic security, Shira Wainsky’s murals called attention to the universal importance of home. Photograph by C. C. Cannuscio.
Images of Health

IMAGE 4—In a break from the usual work of the Mural Arts Program, which involves extensive community negotiations regarding how and where murals will be erected, Shira Wafinsky installed a series of “guerilla murals” and wheat-pasted prints that marked a path to the Art House. Photograph by S. Weinik.

“After weeks of outreach, most of the street’s residents consented to have their homes painted. Now, the artwork stands as a sign of community solidarity.”

The project’s most ambitious change transformed the distressed block surrounding the Art House (Image 5). Lots were cleaned, and houses were painted. Bold colors drew the homes together into a graphic mural designed by Emel Martinez. This part of the project required community trust and cooperation, which had long been undermined by an active local drug trade. After weeks of outreach, most of the street’s residents consented to have their homes painted. Now, the artwork stands as a sign of community solidarity.

Toward the end of the project, one of the originally resistant residents emerged from his house, broom in hand. He wanted to be a part of cleaning up the block.

He was living proof: art ignites change.

About the Authors
Carolyn Cannuscio and David A. Asch are with the Center for Health Equity Research and Promotion, Philadelphia VA Medical Center and the Leonard Davis Institute of Health Economics at the University of Pennsylvania, Philadelphia. Carolyn Cannuscio is also with the Department of Family Medicine and Community Health, University of Pennsylvania Perelman School of Medicine. Carolyn Cannuscio, Eva Bugos, and Eve E. Weiss are with the Mixed Methods Research Laboratory and the Center for Public Health Initiatives, University of Pennsylvania. Shira Wafinsky is with the Mural Arts Program, Philadelphia, PA.

Correspondence should be sent to Carolyn Cannuscio, PhD, 1260 Hamilton Walk, Anatomy and Cell Biology Building, Room 145, University of Pennsylvania, Philadelphia, PA 19104 (e-mail: carolyneccann@gmail.com). Reprints can be ordered at http://www.ajph.org by clicking the “Reprints/Permissions” link.

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Contributors
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