

# WORKING TOGETHER

A MAGAZINE OF THE WINNIPEG FOUNDATION

- Work of art for mental health community
- Grants program has youth dancing
- Sports inspire giving family



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# ARTISTIC VISION

INNOVATIVE PROGRAM  
EMPOWERS THROUGH ART



*Alumni artists and their work at Artbeat Studio. (Executive director Lucille Bart and studio coordinator Nigel Bart appear third and fourth from the left in the main image.)*

***Making art is the process of turning vision into reality – requiring equal parts skill, creativity, raw materials, energy, courage and support. The work can be difficult, but the results have the potential to be profound for all who encounter it.***

The process of turning an idea for a mental health recovery art centre into a vibrant, thriving, grassroots organization has been much the same. Artbeat Studio, located in the Exchange District, is the masterpiece of Nigel Bart and his mother Lucille, with the assistance of a dedicated team of volunteers, board members, local artists and supporters.

Artbeat provides studio space for up to ten artists recovering from mental illness. The studio provides a peer group, fosters meaningful work and offers outreach opportunities in the community. It's a singular approach to recovery, explains Lucille, the studio's executive director.

"We're inventing something here. We're unique as a community-based project and a consumer-initiated project," she says. "It's putting power and control back into the hands of the individuals."

Diagnosed with schizophrenia at age 19, Nigel Bart found the process of creating art to be therapeutic, and he credits it for his healing.

"Our family had this horrendous experience where I had this breakdown with schizophrenia right at the height of my youth and we were feeling our way through, trying to do the best things to help me recover. We tapped into my art-making," says Nigel.

Soon after his diagnosis, Nigel started working in his mother's pottery studio and began noticing improvements in his health and self-esteem. He went on to gain a fine arts degree from The University of Manitoba. As an artist and worker in the mental health field, he encountered other consumers who were healing through art but lacked options.

"There are so few alternative services in the community," says Lucille. "There was an urgency for us because some people weren't surviving; that's the huge crisis of mental health problems. It's not just a trivial thing."

The Barts took their idea to funders, found committed volunteer board members, acquired and redeveloped

warehouse space on Albert Street and opened the doors of Artbeat in early 2005. The organization has received support from The Winnipeg Foundation.

Since its launch, 25 visual artists, working in a variety of media, have made use of the creative and healing opportunities of Artbeat. Artists apply for a six-month term at Artbeat. The studio can accommodate up to ten artists per term. Participating artists have designated studio spaces, which they're expected to use at least 20 hours a week. Though artists must provide their own materials, Artbeat has arranged discounts with a number of local suppliers. At the end of each term, artists hold an exhibition of their work in the studio. Alumni artists continue to be involved after their term has ended, acting as volunteers at the studio or doing community outreach work.

Whether its acceptance to a university fine arts program, improved family relationships or the confidence to apply for a job, participating artists have made positive progress as a result of the program.

"One can take a dark experience and turn it around and make a positive artwork out of it," Nigel says. "If artists can express what they've gone through, they're able to understand it better, put it behind them and grow from that experience."

The Barts say the program reduces feelings of isolation common among both mental health consumers and artists, and that it's helping participants reintegrate into the broader community. Through public outreach, art shows and participation in special events and exhibitions, the Artbeat artists are helping reduce the stigma associated with mental illness.

"What's happening here is very neat because people have a place to work [and] they have an understanding of what one another is going through because they've been there. And they get such support from the public because people are coming here because of the positive aspect of the artwork. The barriers around mental illness are just gone," says Lucille.

The program also crosses boundaries between sectors, encompassing arts, health care and community service. The success of the program is drawing interest from other communities says Nigel, who hopes that the Artbeat model can be replicated elsewhere with similar results.

"It's very powerful, we know that, but how it works is kind of mysterious," Lucille adds. "It's helped our own family and everyone who comes through here really claims to be changed." **W**

**"ONE CAN TAKE A DARK EXPERIENCE AND TURN IT AROUND AND MAKE A POSITIVE ARTWORK OUT OF IT."**

