

Artsmith Mentor Workshop Lays the Foundation for Inaugural Program: Words vs. Pictures

By Tessa C. Smith

“Through my photography, I think about the impact I have on the world. For example, I did a piece about the 300 hundred girls missing in Nigeria,” said Chelsea Gardner, 17, a student attending The Hewitt School on Manhattan’s Upper East Side. “I hope to pass on my passion for art to the kids and I hope to gain leadership skills in the process.” Chelsea was one of 13 high school students at Artsmith’s informational workshop on May 30, 2015. The students’ artistic resumes boast years of involvement in creative outlets like theater, creative writing, dance and drawing. They talked about how the Arts have enriched their lives and their plans to pay it forward.

Artsmith and Prep for Prep hosted the workshop, bringing together prospective mentors for Words vs. Pictures, Artsmith’s inaugural program. Artsmith’s founder, Tricia Smith, a Prep for Prep Alumna, sought to tap into Prep’s impressive history of working with students from disadvantaged communities. “Artsmith is about opening young people’s eyes to possibilities and opportunities that they might not know are out there or don’t think they deserve or could ever have. That’s what Prep for Prep did for me,” Smith said.

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Chelsea Gardner, Peer Mentor

Since 1978, Prep for Prep has offered gifted students of color from New York City access to private schools in the city and boarding schools in the Northeast. “Since Prep is so invested in helping kids from communities like the ones Artsmith would serve, I started to wonder if there was a way Prep could help Artsmith with our kids,” Tricia explained. Words vs. Pictures will use literary arts to encourage reading, dialogue, and community collaboration – the same type of interactive exercises attendees engaged in at the workshop.

“I liked the five-minute poem, said Alrick Shaw, 15, who attends Poly Prep Country Day School in Brooklyn, New York. “Often we associate relevance to something because it is similar to something else; [everyone’s] input was relevant, but unique.”

Each prospective mentor added one line to create a thoughtful poem in just five minutes. For Smith, the exercise further demonstrated the caliber of the potential mentors. “I am really looking forward to working with these kids in the peer mentor program because I know they will continue to do incredible things and will be great influences on the Artsmith kids.”

Alrick, who is taking an AP music theory class, hopes to contribute his knowledge of music to the mentorship program, teaching mentees to perceive and interpret music and their world on a deeper level.

Like Chelsea, Hayley Taylor, a sophomore at Phillips Academy in Andover, Massachusetts, attended the workshop to learn how being an Artsmith mentor could provide an opportunity to share the benefits of the Arts with young people and be a stepping stone to her future.

“I’m interested in education as a career,” Hayley shared. “This will be a good way to explore how the Arts can be incorporated in the classroom.”

During the workshop, the participants were also asked to imagine how they would facilitate the Words vs. Pictures program.

Haley’s discussion group explored how gleaned concepts from books could help mentees navigate important life decisions. The group developed a reading list of coming of age novels including S.E. Hinton’s *The Outsiders* and Harper Lee’s *To Kill a Mocking Bird*. They highlighted books they believed could teach mentees transformational lessons about overcoming challenges, developing interpersonal skills and relationship building.

“I think the workshop turned out extremely well,” Smith said. And I definitely have to thank Mike O’Leary, Prep for Prep’s Director of Leadership Development Projects, for his willingness to partner with us in this endeavor and for encouraging the Prep kids to participate.”

“And it’s not just about what the Prep kids can do for Artsmith but also about what Artsmith can do for the Prep kids,” Smith added.

Smith aims to include Prep mentors on an Artsmith advisory council, giving the students an opportunity to contribute to Artsmith’s future planning and programming.