

Mary Evelyn Pritchard  
Arts Internship Fund  
The Birmingham Museum of Art  
Summer 2010

I was fortunate enough to receive a stipend from the Arts Internship Fund for the summer of 2010. Thanks to the funding, I was able to spend eight weeks working with the Artist in Residence, Toby Richards, at the Birmingham Museum of Art in Birmingham, Alabama. Although the internship turned out to be quite different than what I had initially expected or even discussed in the application process, it was an absolutely relevant and important experience to have had before leaving college.

Because the Artist in Residence at the Birmingham Museum of Art works within the Education department, this is the department in which I interned. I was a little apprehensive about working in Education because prior to this experience, my love for art did not necessarily include a love for teaching it. However, that being said, my job proved to be a very unique one, including a diverse and, at times, rigorous work load that allowed me to engage in a variety of art-related functions.

When I arrived at work for the first time on June first, I was greeted by my supervisor, Toby Richards. Toby was immediately engaging. I was relieved to have her talking to me with such ease, but was quickly bombarded by a long laundry list of things that I was responsible for helping her complete by the following Monday. She explained to me that her job was an unusual one, in that it was constantly changing and demanding new things. She told me that the current month had been designated by the Education department head as "Outreach Month" and that

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following a week of preparation, she and I would be taking the art van off site to different locations where we would be teaching art classes. So following an exhausting week of prep, we set off to teach at Camp Birmingham. Camp Birmingham is a local program that provides a structured and educational place for children in the city school system during the summer. The camp takes place on city school campuses all over the greater Birmingham area. At first, I would watch as Toby taught the kids. I would hold up posters, pass out supplies, etc, and watch silently in awe as she managed to engage these often rowdy and uninterested children with simple art projects designed to bring out creativity and teach basic art concepts. Initially I struggled to interact with everyone around me. I felt a distance between the kids and counselors working at the camp, but Toby encouraged me (often out loud) to sit down and help a particular child or two with his work of art, forcing me bridge this distance. I survived day one, but was a little exhausted and unsure about my newly acquired job; face-to-face outreach and babysitting had never been something I felt comfortable with or enjoyed.

Day two, we headed to another Camp Birmingham location, and upon realizing there was a much larger group of children than was expected, Toby quickly volunteered me to teach my own class of roughly 40 first graders while she taught another age group. I was horrified. However, I really had no choice, so as calmly as I could, I began the lesson and was amazed as some of the kids in the room seemed to light up as they began creating their own artwork.

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By the end of week two, I felt an unbelievable comfort with the kids and counselors at Camp Birmingham. I knew that Toby and I had not managed to reach every child, in fact some were obviously and outspokenly uninterested in art, but with each class, there were always one or two kids who proudly approached us post-lesson to show off their works of art and ask questions about the museum or art in general. It was in these moments that I realized we were making some sort of difference and most importantly, I had a new understanding about the way in which art can tear down social, economic, and ethnic boundaries. It doesn't matter who you are, two people can always connect through the process of creating, and this notion made me feel really good about my choice to major in Fine Art.

As Camp Birmingham concluded, we moved on to Children's Hospital. I was charged with the responsibility of creating four or five projects that we would complete in the "Room of Magic" at Children's. So, for the next two weeks, I went alone, with the help of some high school volunteers, and worked with patients, patient's siblings and parents to create some truly beautiful works of art. Again, as with Camp Birmingham, the first few days were tough. The kids I worked with were often quite sick and in desperate need of some activity. It was my job to hopefully provide them with an opportunity to engage in something new and stimulating. After several days, however, I felt unusually close to so many of these kids and their families as well as my volunteers. I couldn't help but feel proud of myself for creating and then successfully executing these lessons and projects without any of

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Toby's help. I felt a great sense of relief when she and one of the curators told me how pleased they were with everything and that many of the pieces would hang in a special exhibit in the museum this fall.

To conclude Outreach Month, we spent several days teaching at the Horizon School, a program for young adults with learning disabilities. This is probably where I learned to feel the most comfortable. I grew to know several of young adults and was continuously impressed by their capabilities. I felt as though I began really special friendships with several of the students, who I still often hear from via Facebook.

I definitely feel as though the outreach portion of my internship was the most challenging, but it also proved to be the most rewarding. It forced me to step out of my comfort zone, and it demonstrated to me, first hand, just what art is capable of. It was the first time I really saw this discipline outside of the swanky gallery walls and in the hands of everyday, wonderfully real people. I had a new appreciation for what the simple process of creating could do for any individual and just how easily it could be used as a mechanism to bridge virtually any gap between people.

Following the outreach, I began working on a variety of projects at the museum. Every couple weeks I was responsible for creating and preparing a simple art project to be offered to those attending *Art On The Rocks*, the Museums' summertime cocktail parties, which included food, music, and usually a new exhibition opening, which I used as the theme for the projects. I spent time

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organizing, unpacking and repacking, as well as preparing the completed Children's Hospital pieces for installation in the exhibition. I worked to create a children's project for each month for the coming year. These projects will be offered within the museum and are intended to help younger people more easily understand and connect with the exhibitions. In general, I became the go-to girl for template making and project instruction writing. Throughout this second month, working inside the office gave me the opportunity to get to know and respect so many of the museum's employees and create some lasting friendships.

Although I must admit I do not intend to pursue a career in art education or template making, I still feel that the experience I had as an intern this summer was so significant. Not only did it help me practically, as far realizing particulars about art-related careers and work environments, it gave me a new appreciation and respect for the discipline, one that I could not have gotten inside a college classroom. With that in mind, of this one thing I am certain: I intend to pursue an art-related career in hopes that continuing to work in the discipline will help me to be a constantly progressing individual while simultaneously connecting me to the people around me. I am so thankful for this opportunity and would encourage anyone to take advantage of it!