

CITIZEN ARTISTS REPORTING FOR DUTY: ARTISTYEAR PREPARES A NEW GENERATION OF TEACHING ARTISTS THROUGH NATIONAL SERVICE

BY D'ANNE
WITKOWSKI

IMAGINE, if you will, a kindergarten screamer and crying. She has just been caught trying to run out of the school building and has been placed in the library where she awaits the arrival of the assistant principal. She is pinching herself as hard as she can. She is trying to pick up a chair to throw it. You don't know why she is upset, you only know that she is clearly struggling.

What do you do?

If you're Caleb Wiebe, you take out your trumpet and show her how the valves work. She likes drawing, so you ask her to show you what she can draw. By the time the assistant principal arrives she is calm.

Wiebe's intervention works because he is an ArtistYear

Fellow in the child's music room. She recognizes him from a class in which she is engaged and feels noticed. And so during this moment of crisis, "Mr. Caleb" is a trusted and familiar adult at a time when she needs one most.

This is not exactly the role Wiebe imagined himself playing as a teaching artist. After years of conservatory training at Indiana University, Colburn, and Curtis, he pictured himself working at a high school somewhere leading brass sectionals and giving trumpet lessons. He did not picture himself at Samuel Powel Elementary School in West Philadelphia teaching children how to play the recorder.

But as an ArtistYear Fellow, that's exactly what he did.

And while Wiebe might have

been a little nervous on his first day, he knew that he could do this. Not only was he paired with Carroll A. Kelly, a veteran music teacher at Powel, but he also knew he had the full support of ArtistYear backing him up.

"The thing that is really great about ArtistYear is that they work with the schools to make sure it's a good fit for both the fellow and for the school," Wiebe says.

A part of the AmeriCorps network, ArtistYear is the first national service program dedicated to arts education. The organization trains and supports recent college arts graduates to serve as full-time teaching artists in Title I schools, where they collaborate with school faculty to deepen and expand arts experiences.

Upon arriving at Powel, Wiebe and Kelly worked together to create a plan for how Wiebe could best help. Class size was identified as a big problem.

"Most classes were at capacity," Wiebe says. About 33 students in a classroom, in fact, and many students had IEPs, which means they received some level of special education. Their main classrooms were staffed with a teacher and another adult. But when it came time for music, Kelly was on his own.

Wiebe and Kelly determined that the best way to help would be for Wiebe to pull out small groups of up to 10 students for recorder classes. These were students who needed additional motivation or challenge. "Mr. Kelly would then have fewer students in his class so he could better focus his teaching," Wiebe says. With this set up, Wiebe saw 65 students every week, building a strong recorder choir and improvisation class. His goal was to create a space where otherwise disengaged students could have a voice through music. However, Wiebe was not an instant success. Though he



2018 ArtistYear Fellow Caleb Wiebe with his Samuel Powel music students after rehearsal

relied on his ArtistYear training and curriculum to structure his sessions, like most first-year teaching artists, Wiebe had to learn on the ground.

One thing he quickly realized is that even the best laid plans can, and often do, go awry. "I would do these lesson plans and spend hours thinking through the entire plan, from the moment when the students would come into my classroom through the moment they were walking out. It never went how I had visualized it."

Bringing the perfectionism he had cultivated during his years in conservatory to the classroom at Powel wasn't working. He had to devise a better way.

When his advisor at ArtistYear came to observe his class she told him something surprising: "You talk too much." The children needed more time playing music, and less time listening to him talk about music. Wiebe met weekly with his advisor and the other ArtistYear Fellows to discuss issues and ideas in the classroom, something Wiebe found invaluable.

So Wiebe learned to let go of his desire to control every class dynamic and outcome. He talked less and made more flexible plans.

"I found that when I became less dependent on a perfect plan I was then able to make better relationships with the students and meet their needs," he says. In other

words, he focused on the students as individual learners and got to know them. It was through connections like these that he was able to calm that distressed kindergarten in the library. Like all accepted ArtistYear Fellows, Wiebe came to the organization with strong

age," Wiebe says. He wanted to find a way to live out these values through a life in music. His conservatory training did not give him the tools he needed for this kind of career. When he learned about ArtistYear and its mission to develop citizen artists like him in order to provide a

in tears."

This response from his students showed him that he really did make a difference in their lives. "I don't know how much they remember on their recorder," he says, "but I think that's less important than if I made a positive impact on them wanting to be at school and them wanting to continue to learn."

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mission alignment. Wiebe grew up in the Mennonite Church. Inspired by his father, who played violin and viola, and the four-part a cappella singing that is a big part of Mennonite worship services, Wiebe knew he wanted to study and perform music.

However, Wiebe never felt comfortable with the traditional end goal for a professional musician: practice until you're perfect, then join a large symphony orchestra.

"In the Mennonite tradition, peace and social justice were highly regarded and those were instilled in me as important values at a very early

year of service teaching arts education to underserved children, he knew it would be a good fit.

When he recalls his year at Powel, he speaks fondly of the relationships he formed with his students.

"We were able to build something very special," he says. "I went and visited Powel for their winter concert six months after I finished teaching there. The students started walking in and saw me and said, 'It's Mr. Caleb!' and ran and gave me hugs and made sure all of their friends knew that Mr. Caleb was there. I was pretty much

"It was an opportunity through music to learn how to be better people to each other; how we can be supportive and how we can work together," he said of his year at Powel. "All of these things that go beyond how to play a specific note on a recorder."

A new ArtistYear Fellow has now come to Powel after Wiebe, building on the foundation he created. ArtistYear partners with schools for multiple years, helping to build capacity for more arts-rich schools.

ArtistYear's training is robust, preparing Fellows not only for success as a teaching artist in a Title I school context, but also for a career as a community-minded artist. Wiebe has embedded the lessons of

leadership and social justice into his post-ArtistYear work. He is now a teaching artist for elementary brass students at Play On, Philly!, an el Sistema inspired music program in Philadelphia. His professional brass sextet, The Brass Project, has education, access, and social relevance as core mission components. Armed with experience and training, Wiebe is curating a career in music that feels meaningful to him. And he is just beginning.

"I will always have more to learn as a teacher and an artist, but being full-time with ArtistYear for an entire year was an incredible jump-start to this kind of work," Wiebe explains, "and on top of that, I had a cohort of other artists to learn and grow with." Wiebe looks forward to Ar-

tistYear's continued expansion, believing the benefit to school-based arts programs and the field of teaching artistry will be significant.

"Right now there are 25 Fellows in three locations, Philadelphia, New York, and Colorado," he says. "They are doing so much in the communities they are in. And if

you think about increasing that to a hundred, or a thousand. What if you could get a million people to serve for a year in the arts? I think it would have an unbelievable effect on our country."

Learn more about ArtistYear or apply to become a Fellow at ArtistYear.org.



ArtistYear music students and 2018 ArtistYear Fellow Caleb Wiebe after a winter community concert in West Philadelphia



ArtistYear

D'ANNE WITKOWSKI is a writer living in Southfield, Michigan with interests in social justice and the arts. Visit her at www.dtwitkowski.com.

ARTISTYEAR, a proud new part of the AmeriCorps network, is the first national service program that enables artists to dedicate a year of service to our country. ArtistYear believes the arts—as vehicles for critical-thinking, empathy, self-discipline, social bonds, and civic engagement—are imperative for a thriving democracy. Our vision is to develop engaged citizen-artists committed to strengthening the fabric of our nation. How? By supporting school districts to provide every underserved student in America with access to arts education via national service. ArtistYear recruits, trains, and supports artists who seek to harness their unique skills and dedicate themselves as full-time teaching-artists to underserved youth.