

A Closer Look at AS220 Youth

by Anne Kugler

AS220 Youth is a free arts education program in Providence, Rhode Island, serving young people ages 14 to 21. AS220 Youth has three teaching sites: our downtown Providence studio, UCAP Middle School, and the Rhode Island Training School, the state's juvenile detention facility.

While our program is open to any young person with an interest in the arts, our goal is to engage youth in the child welfare and/or juvenile justice systems. Once youth begin attending the program regularly, they build an online portfolio. Youth portfolios can be viewed here: Youth.as220.org/portfolios.

After youth attain technical skills in an artistic medium, staff members link them with professional opportunities. These could include exhibiting art work in a gallery show, assisting on a commercial photo shoot, recording a mixtape in our studio, or performing with our hip hop dance troupe, 2legit.



In addition to after-school programming, AS220 Youth runs an Apprentice Program for young adults ages 17 to 21. Apprentices come to work each day and complete large-scale, collaborative projects that generate income for our studio.

AS220 Youth by the numbers

- 500 youth served each year at three teaching sites
- of these, 85 percent qualify for free or reduced lunch at their public schools
- one in three participants (33 percent) are, or were, in state care
- 28 youth hired as Studio Apprentices
- 54 hired in our summer jobs program

AS220 Youth as a Will To Adorn Youth Access Program

Will to Adorn's Program Coordinator, Sally Van de Water, and Curator, Diana Baird N'Diaye, invited AS220 Youth to Washington, DC, in July 2013 for an initial training on folklore and ethnographic research. AS220 representatives Charlene Wooten, Felicia Megginson, and Anne Kugler spent three days learning to use digital media to document "artisans of style" in our community. We integrated this folklore curriculum into existing photo and video production classes. Youth were asked to complete street photography projects, oral histories, and documentary videos. An example is this video on barbershops: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9Cye13Fs0SM>.

Because AS220 Youth has a long history of teaching photo and video, it was relatively easy for us to engage teens in that creative process. However, we didn't have any experience teaching folklore or anthropology fieldwork. We were challenged to engage youth in the historical and ethnographic research that adds depth and meaning to cultural studies.

Youth Engagement

In one of our Will to Adorn workshops, I was trying to engage youth in a conversation about something "old-fashioned," like why the distinctive African fabric is called Dutch Wax. They weren't so interested in the history but loved the gorgeous colors and patterns. The conversation quickly turned to buying fabric and making clothes, then showing them off. It seemed like everyone in the room had a secret desire to be a runway model! The idea of hiring a DJ and hosting a huge party really transformed our work with the Will to Adorn. The project suddenly felt more accessible and fun, and everyone could see themselves playing a role.

Many more young people began showing up at our planning meetings, and it was easier to involve them in conversations about cultural history. They began researching African American style and created online mood boards on Tumblr to document what they learned and what they liked. The mood boards referenced different aspects of Black style, from Josephine Baker's feather plumes to Angel Haze's dark psychedelia. Maasai beadwork and Ghanaian *Adrinka* symbols popped up next to Solange in Ankara short-shorts.

Thanks to rap's current obsession with high fashion, many guys were willing to help out. They collaged pictures of their favorite emcees dressed to the nines: A\$AP Rocky in leather Givenchy shorts and Pharrell sporting Lanvin tuxedos and the latest Bathing Ape gear.

Planning for the Show

In January 2014, our planning process shifted into high gear. Charlene ran tryouts for models and rehearsals began for the models. Our hostess and emcee, Ronya Traynham, organized guest artists and designed the décor. Boston-based designer Judith Bashala graciously offered to show her clothing and began coming to Providence on a monthly basis for fittings.

AS220 VISTA volunteer Janay Pina worked with youth to develop an African-inspired makeup look, while Nila Lares was sewing skirts and sundresses out of colorful geometric print fabrics. Kyle Collins created a line of hoodies for the show, and Fernando Flaquer got busy screen printing RIOT in Japanese on all his clothes.

One of the most rewarding and enjoyable partnerships to develop was with a group of teens from Central Falls, Rhode Island, called the Fashionistas. Led by teaching artist Rachel Stern with model coaches Sammy Medina and Sadio Sokona, the group designs and models clothing in an afterschool workshop. They also learn makeup techniques and the basics of fashion photography. When the Fashionistas learned about the Will to Adorn fashion show, they began choreographing a scene for the show. Rachel also brought the Will to Adorn Project to an alternative education classroom called the Square Mile Program. The ten young men in the program were given digital cameras and asked to shoot photos of Central Falls swag. The team assembled their footage into a short video that premiered at the show.



The Day Finally Arrives!

After months of preparation, the day of the show finally arrived. The date fell during the week of public school vacation, so young people were on AS220's doorstep at 10 am, ready to get busy. Some youth focused on getting the stage set up, while others organized the media files we needed to project. Our social butterflies took to the Internet, letting friends, followers, and family know that something special was about to happen. The show was slated to begin at 6, but by 5 pm, we already had a crowd. DJ Kris Fame hit the decks and played the latest hits from West Africa, while Nigerian chef Iyabo Odewole fed everyone jerk chicken with rice and peas. When that ran out, our friends from New Orleans' Ashé Cultural Center showed up with enormous pots of spicy gumbo.

AS220 Youth's Photo Program set up a photo booth, with a backdrop painted by Liberian artist Uriah Zoegar. Audience members, models, and guest artists lined up to get their portraits taken.

Our hosts, Ronya Traynham and Mike Johnson, got the night off to a great start with their charisma and humor. They explained the Will to Adorn Project and AS220 Youth's involvement. Then our models and guest artists took to the stage:

- Spoken word artist Christopher Johnson offered a sartorial autobiography
- Will to Adorn videos from AS220 Youth and Central Falls were shown
- Playwrights Yunus and Habibah Qudus performed a one-act play about how brand-name clothes DON'T make the man
- Youth designers Kyle and Fernando talked about their nascent streetwear line, Broken Monuments
- AS220's rap group, ZuKrewe, and dance troupes 2legit and Project 401 performed

And then there were the clothes. Models from AS220 and Central Falls took turns doing scenes with Judith Bashala's outfits, as well as Personal Style sections. By the time the models hit the stage, the cheers were deafening. The crowd was incredibly supportive and showed all the performers love, regardless of their looks or the cost of their clothes. Emcee Ronya said, *"I feel like it went wonderfully. Even during the months of*



Square Mile Street Style Video
[<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=L3YnKVofAm0%5D>]



Central Falls Fashionistas
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EcL-Lti0gy8>

planning, I didn't imagine this many people would come. When you looked out from the stage, it was just a sea of faces."

ZuKrewe member Casimiro Pereira agreed. *"I walked out feeling so happy. I walked out ecstatic. There's so much negativity in our community, especially among young people from this neighborhood who's got problems with people from that neighborhood. This night just goes to show that we're all one community and can support one another."*

Lessons Learned

AS220 Youth is an art studio, and when youth come into our space, it's with the expectation that they're going to make something. Engaging youth in a more academic pursuit—like ethnographic research—was challenging. Success came when we made research a means to an end, with the end being a big party for the whole community. As soon as the lights went down at the end of the show, youth began asking when the next one was going to happen. If we do move forward with another fashion show, we plan to dedicate more time on the front end to folkloristic research. We'd love to bring Smithsonian curators and educators to AS220 to run workshops on sartorial traditions and "artisans of style."

Behind the Lens: Girls of Color in the Media at the Museum of the African Diaspora

by **Indiia Wilmott**

This community program puts African American adornment traditions at the heart of our media literacy program. Many of our lessons begin with an activity about a particular type of adornment and then we look critically at how that tradition is depicted in various media outlets. For example, we recently studied African American hair adornment and then took an in-depth look at the natural hair social media movement. Once the girls had a historical reference for their traditions, they were able to look at current trends with a more critical eye. I found that hair adornment is a great way to get girls to open up about how media can shape how we see ourselves.



Questions asked in our activities include: Who's in charge of the messaging? What exactly is the message being sent to young women of color? How does this messaging make them feel about their own identity? These important questions contribute to the success of our lessons, which we have learned must include these factors: celebrating women of color, analyzing the current media messaging surrounding women of color, and asking how such messages make the girls feel.

Our hope with Behind the Lens is that we inspire our girls not only to look at social media, reality television, magazines and other media with a critical eye, but also create or share content that they want to see and that they want others to see. They can start a Tumblr page, Pinterest board, or Facebook community with the purpose of sharing positive images and stories about women of color. In addition, we have given them the groundwork to help them speak up when they see something that looks or feels wrong because they understand the power behind dress, adornment, and media.