

# Teaching Creativity One Cut of Glass at a Time

## The Stained Glass Project in Philadelphia is changing lives

*By Amy Moritz*

As a high school student, Morgan Gilbert didn't know anything about stained glass. With the "inner city kid" label in Philadelphia, his arts education had been minimal at best.

Then he started going to an afterschool program where two women introduced him to stained glass. Now, he's been in the food industry for nearly a decade and currently works as a sous chef in Philadelphia.

So what does working as a chef have to do with an afterschool program in stained glass?

Turns out, quite a bit.

During the year-long program in Philadelphia called The Stained Glass Project, students learn the technique of stained glass along with taking field trips to see stained glass and meet other artists.

"I was on one of our trips and we were visiting a synagogue," Gilbert said. "We stopped for lunch and I had told Miss Joan I was interested in becoming a chef. She went to talk to the chef and he gave me a tour of the kitchen and my first insight into what it takes to work in a kitchen. I'm actually doing that now."

"The experience of being in that program opened my eyes to see that life was more than my every day. I never knew what stained glass was until I actually was in a program and then it just opened my eyes to other things. It opened doors. There are other things out there and it made me want to try new things."

It's the success story that keeps Miss Joan—Joan Myerson Shrager—and Paula Tracton Mandel, the co-founders of The Stained Glass Project in Philadelphia, plugging away 15 years later.

"Doing art enhances all kinds of learning and creativity," Mandel said. "The goal is not to make stained glass artists out of them. The goal is to show them a whole world out there of creativity, to get them thinking outside the box so they can adapt in their lives."

The program first began as a once-a-month offering as part of a larger after school program for Germantown

Mentor Charry Burr works with students.  
Photos: Joan Myerson Shrager





High School Students in 2005, then moved on to a weekly program at the Kendrick Recreation Center with a dedicated space for stained glass projects. The program for inner city Philadelphia students usually has about 12 participants each year. Mandel is a mixed-media artist who has used stained glass as part of her work while Shrager works in digital art and sculpture.

“We started the program making little do-dads with the kids—necklaces and picture frames,” Mandel said. But two years into the program, Mandel realized the program could be so much more after attending a fundraiser her friend Sharon Katz was holding for a school she was building in South Africa.

Katz is founder of the Peace Train, performers who promoted understanding in South Africa during apartheid. The school in KwaNgcolosi is for orphaned children, many of them orphaned by AIDS. Conversations among the three led to Mandel and Shrager proposing their stained glass students create windows for the new school.

The group learned about South Africa and the lives of the children who lived in KwaNgcolosi, making the program more than just a stained glass class for inner city students, but a lesson in history and sociology. And the experience in making windows for the South African school led to a new road for the program—each year, the students create windows for a specific place. One year was The Morris Jeff Community School in New Orleans, helping to bring some beauty back to an area after Hurricane Katrina. In 2019, the program made windows for a school in Puerto Rico, helping another area devastated by a hurricane, this time Hurricane Maria.

“The idea that these children who don’t have much can give something to the greater world has become a focus of the program,” Mandel said. “It gives these kids a chance to give to others. Some kids have never been able to do that or felt they couldn’t do that.”

They felt it viscerally after creating the windows for the school in New Orleans. The program received financial backing from a local bank to send the entire group to the city to present the windows. And the scene that ensued was memorable.

“When our van pulled in front of that school, there were kids younger than ours on the playground,” Shrager said. “Our own kids, who were teenagers, started to walk toward them and these little ones jumped off the playground equipment and ran into the arms of our students. That’s something I will never forget.”

Last year, they were able to raise funds to fly 12 students from Puerto Rico to Philadelphia to meet the students who created their windows.

“They were from an area that was devastated by Hurricane Maria and many lost family members. Many lost their homes,” Mandel said. “They were in the depths of depression and were inspired by coming to the mainland and meeting the students and seeing the windows.”

While the connection to giving back and helping lift others up is a core part of the program, so too is the artistic freedom they are given when learning stained glass.

“The first session we give kids cutters and glass and teach them how to cut,” Mandel said. “It’s magical to see the transformation that sucks them into the process.”

“We have a lot of boys in the group and it’s very attractive to boys because it seems a bit dangerous,” Shrager said. “They have total freedom to make their own choice in their design. You want to have a purple nose? Be my guest. Here’s Picasso. Look at his faces. We feel this is probably totally contrary to their experience in their public school where they all have to come in, sit down, and conform.”

“I think the secret sauce is we have a lot of mentors to work with the kids individually in the beginning,” Mandel said, although most of them don’t have stained glass experience. Glass technique is where Mandel



Caren Borowsky and Lily Davis are two mentors who work with students at the Stained Glass Project; Photo: Joan Myerson Shrager

leads the group, but the driving force remains the vision of the students.

“It’s just giving them the confidence to know they can do this,” Mandel said. “Many haven’t had any art experience but we tell them to do whatever they want. There’s no wrong way to do it. It’s up to them. Nobody is going to tell at them. Nobody is going to tell them they can’t do it.”

And as the two get to know the students, they find out their interests, their goals and dreams. It’s not about creating stained glass artists, after all, but about helping students find their creativity, their voice, and confidence.

So Mandel and Shrager take the students on field trips and help foster introductions—like the one that led Morgan Gilbert to talking with a chef in a restaurant about his career intentions.

“You could call us connectors,” Mandel said. “We’re out there in the world. We know people who know people

and we’ve been able to connect a kid to somebody who was very important for them to get a job or follow a career path.”

Success with their students is their biggest joy, but their next goal would be to help another city set up a similar program.

“We would love other cities to do this with kids,” Mandel said. “We would love to have anyone contact us to talk about setting up a program like this.”

*For more information, visit their Facebook page (@TheStainedGlassProject) or contact Paula Mandel at paula.mandel@gmail.com.*

*Amy Moritz works at the Buffalo headquarters of the Stained Glass Association of America. ■*