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CENTERPIECE

Art House

Youth art programs have turned students' homes into studios and stages during the pandemic.

Marielle Argueza

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Animator Joyce Kim got into making art purely for the love of it. "I don't see my art as good or bad, it's a thing that I began doing because I enjoyed it," she says. The feedback from YAC instructors and deadlines for exhibits have kept her on target. During shelter-in-place, an anonymous donor enabled YAC to get Kim a new iPad to continue making art.

Joel Angel Juarez

AT THE SHINY, NEW MONTEREY CONFERENCE CENTER, THE STEINBECK BALLROOM

TRANSFORMED INTO A JAZZ CLUB. Complete with moodily lit stages, young musicians dressed in matching combos of all-black with a pop of color showed off their budding talent. Vocalists peppered scatting with emotive melodies, ensembles of instrumentalists played rhythmic hard bop and loud brassy big band, small groups offered up improv solos. Applause and cheers from parents, fans and teachers followed.

Around 1,700 people attended the 49th Next Generation Jazz Festival in Monterey on Friday, April 5, 2019. The festival drew talent from the best middle school-, high school – and college-aged musician from across the country. It's an annual culmination of Monterey Jazz Festival's educational outreach efforts: a promise that jazz is alive and well, and that the young musicians on their stages will be the ones to keep the legacy alive.

Arts programs like these give a chance for serious young musicians to stoke their passion. "The kids really enjoy it. This is a place where they get to meet other young musicians, some even start bands together," Monterey Jazz Festival Executive Director Colleen Bailey says.

The following year, the Covid-19 pandemic upended the event, along with other shows and festivals. Monterey Jazz Festival – the other big local showcase for the Next Generation Jazz Orchestra – was no exception.

"We thought we would go dark," Bailey says. But they didn't. Instead, they went virtual, showing recorded concerts by pianist Herbie Hancock, Grammy-nominated clarinetist Anet Cohen Tenet and others, alongside archival material and Q&As. A total of 30,000 people watched over all three days through their screens.

Bailey says the massive attendance can't just be attributed to people simply not having anything to do. It was logistically easier to attend. "We had people from Asia, Africa, the UK, Europe, Central and South America," she says. It was also because the quality was a priority, transferring what worked best to a virtual format. And quality took a lot of practice and creative thinking.

The same sentiment applied for the 2020 Next Gen orchestra, an ensemble of 21 of the nation's best young musicians and their director, Grammy-winning composer and jazz pianist, Gerald Clayton. Typically, Next Gen would gather for a week and practice together for hours. Clayton

tasked himself with finding a way to keep the essential elements of the rigorous educational program alive. “There is no substitute for music making in person, but we still had to make Next Gen a meaningful experience for the students,” he says.

Instead of back-to-back practices for one week, like a jazz boot camp, Clayton sent out three tracks to each member of the Next Gen. Each student was tasked to record themselves listening to the pieces 10 times to prove they were listening. “I made them listen to it a crazy amount of times. Listening is an essential part of jazz,” Clayton says. “Music is a language to describe things, you need to build on your vocabulary. There is no textbook answer – you have to put in the time, and listen really closely.”

The musicians would record themselves playing their parts, later stitched together by a sound engineer. To keep that element of improv and listening alive, each member of the ensemble listened to the finished product and provided comments and analysis to Clayton one-on-one – then recorded their part again. The process spanned nearly a month.

Kellin Hanas, a Next Gen trumpet player in 2019 and 2020, describes her first year in the group a formative experience. “I made some of my best friends then,” she says. She was especially excited to tour, with shows in Canada and Seattle. “That’s such a cool thing for young musicians. You get a real taste of what it’s like to be doing jazz as a career,” she says.

The 2020 Next Gen orchestra was entirely different. In addition to Clayton’s lesson plans, she also recorded a solo, a process that took three or four hours to get perfect. She was also alone – she missed improv, which requires reading the body language of other musicians.

“When I first heard the recording and got my critiques, it sounded so cold,” Hanas says. “Improv makes the music come alive. It’s dependent on looking at your bandmates, and the fact that kind of conversation wasn’t happening was pretty difficult.”

But the modified experience went better than she expected. “Once it was all polished, it was pretty cool. It sounded like an actual band the second time around.”

Shifting arts education online is not unique to the Monterey Jazz Festival. It’s not just schools that have gone remote, but programs that normally bring students together with instruments or paint or costumes. There isn’t any one solution, but after nearly a year of sheltering-in-place, are educators are continuing to find ways to foster community creativity while apart – with some surprising benefits.

"I don't think we are going back. We can only go forward," Bailey says.



When Youth Arts Collective cofounders Meg Biddle, left, and Marcia Perry were forced to close their physical studio (below) due to the pandemic, they set about creating customized "care packages" with art supplies for students so they could continue making art at home.

Joel Angel Juárez



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THE FACADE OF YOUTH ARTS COLLECTIVE LOOKS LIKE AN ORDINARY OFFICE, but inside, the studio opens up to a massive creative space, with artists ages 14-22 painting, drawing and carving. There is movement, music and a constant stream of chatter. Some catch up with friends while rummaging through supplies, others stay laser-focused on their projects. That was of course, before the pandemic.

YAC encourages all types of visual arts while fostering real-life entrepreneurial skills. Essentially, it's a local working artists pipeline.

While some paint with acrylic or chip away at wooden blocks, others, like Joyce Kim – an 18-year-old senior at Monterey High School – could be found in front of a computer, both before and during the pandemic.

Kim describes herself as shy in new environments, but she has thrived with YAC. During her in-person time there, she made friends and learned from the mentorship of YAC founders and local artists Marcia Perry and Meg Biddle.

“It’s really cool that someone says that your art is really good. It’s encouraging,” Kim says.

Kim has been in YAC since 2018, and long knew that she to make art her career. In high school, she settled on becoming an animator, remembering the childhood shows and movies she enjoyed. Then during the pandemic, with more time on her hands than ever and college application deadlines approaching, she decided she wanted to become a storyboard artist – not necessarily animating the characters to digital-life, but the creator who is in charge of staging the scenes.

Starting last March, Kim revived an old project she started at 14, a fan comic of the '70s manga series *Doraemon* by Hiroshi Fujimoto and Motoo Abiko. She started publishing her spinoffs every week online. Kim, who admits she doesn't do well with deadlines, had a newfound drive. “I wanted to finish something on my own to get the practice so I could tell my own stories,” she says.

YAC never left the equation. That’s because as soon as YAC was forced to shut in-person operations, they immediately went to work supplying their students with what Biddle and Perry call “care packages.”

“We sent texts, emails and made calls, and asked about what everybody needed and gave it to them so they could keep working at home,” Biddle says. In most cases, that meant traditional art supplies. They knew Kim had a very specific kind of art that wasn't rooted in acrylic paint or charcoal, but technology. Thanks to an anonymous donor, the nonprofit was able to get a few YACsters, including Kim, new iPads to continue their training. Last year, Kim’s computer broke and she was drawing on a Wacom tablet. “The Wacom was OK,” she says. “I am so grateful for the iPad. It’s improved my experience immensely.”

After assessing needs, YAC also went to work on increasing its presence virtually. The nonprofit took their holiday and summer art shows online, creating a dedicated website for students to show (and sell) their work. They landed additional shows with other art venues, like a 21-year anniversary art show Pacific Grove Art Center titled *YAC 21 Years and Counting*.

“We’re reminding people we’re here and we exist,” Biddle says.

WHEN SHELTER-IN-PLACE ORDERS WERE ENACTED IN MARCH, the first instinct at Palenke Arts wasn't to pivot their services online. It was wondering how the sudden economic slowdown was affecting participants and their families. “We reached out first to our families to see how they were doing, if their kids were getting enough to eat, if they had places to stay,” says Juan Sánchez, executive director.

The reflex to respond to the needs of families took priority over curriculum because the majority of Palenke Arts participants are socioeconomically disadvantaged. If kids weren't eating, sheltered or lacked equipment to go online for school, they wouldn't be able to concentrate, much less access Palenke's programs.

Sánchez spent weeks surveying parents. "You can't just send out an email to our families. Some people don't have an email. Some people don't have phones," he says.

To help families meet immediate survival needs, the arts nonprofit distributed gift cards for essentials, thanks to a Covid-19 relief grant from the Community Foundation for Monterey County.

They could then turn their attention to arts programming. Palenke revolves around an expansive global arts education. It is one of the few programs on the Peninsula – where the Latino population is increasing – that teaches *baile folklórico*, a Mexican dance tradition. It also offers African drumming classes and a popular Latin jazz class.

As the months wore on, Sánchez knew something had to give. Enrollment dropped from 140 kids to 65. On top of that, they learned that group music classes like orchestra and Latin jazz don't translate well to Zoom.

"Teachers were putting in an enormous amount of effort, going one-by-one, asking each student to play their piece or mute their mic," says Sánchez, who teaches a chorus class. "It takes a lot more time and a lot more patience to run a class now."

Latin jazz and orchestra were cut from Palenke Arts' offerings. But by focusing on what works, Sánchez reports increased focus from the students who have stayed. "I had a parent tell me, 'your classes can't start early enough. My daughter is just so depressed. She comes alive during classes,'" he recalls. "We have fewer kids overall, but the focus is a lot better."

The same goes for teachers. Palenke's piano teacher, for example, teaches from Japan. "She wakes up at 6am every day just to give our kids piano lessons," Sánchez says.



Nonprofit Palenke Arts is housed in the Martin Luther King Jr. School of the Arts in Seaside, which is now quiet during remote schooling. Inside, Executive Director Juan Sánchez continues to teach – but through a computer screen. They reduced the number of offerings, and lost in-person concerts, but now produce quality music and dance videos. “There is so much being taken away from our kids, so we wanted to make up for it in some way,” Sánchez says.

Joel Angel Juarez



Joel Angel Juarez

DECADES OF RESEARCH HAVE SHOWN THE IMPORTANCE OF ARTS EDUCATION FOR K-12 STUDENTS. Americans for the Arts' Arts Education Navigator collected statistics from various studies highlighting the benefits of arts education, and they include helping students stay engaged in other subjects, problem-solving skills, and increased high school completion rates, especially among socioeconomically disadvantaged students.

Serving all students has long been part of the mission of arts nonprofits like Monterey Jazz Festival, YAC and Palenke Arts, as well as many others. And some are finding that the virtual way of training young artists makes programs more accessible to kids. "Traveling is cost-prohibitive for a lot of students," Bailey says. "Especially because of the economic impact [of Covid-19], I suspect this pandemic has really been difficult for students who want to pursue a career in the arts."

The same way the Monterey Jazz Festival itself suddenly opened to a broader audience – no travel or lodging expenses – so does educational programs. "Traveling to California is expensive," Bailey says. "Technology is here to stay."

Losing in-person performance was a blow to Palenke, but the organization increased its virtual presence. Their open-to-the-public Facebook paint classes, known as Fridays with Mr. Paul, get as many as 700 views a week, increasing access to arts programming for aspiring painters far beyond Palenke's students. They've also released eight or so high-quality videos of their students performing things like hip-hop dance showcases, a cover of John Legend and Common's "Glory," and a song and dance performance of "La Llorona."

Palenke committed part of its budget to technology and a production team to create the videos. It appears to be a good investment: Where a typical concert would get maybe 120 attendees, they're now clocking in up to 700 views each.

At YAC, the organization itself modernized technologically, and showed and sold kids' work online to more viewers than might have attended the annual in-person event. "Technology democratizes art," Perry says.

Perry and Biddle note that without putting YAC out there in the virtual sphere, the anonymous donor may have never reached out, meaning Kim might not have gotten that new iPad. "We're going to reach so many more kids in the future," Biddle says. "There are kids out there for so many reasons, couldn't attend YAC or don't have art classes. Technology changes that significantly."

IT'S NOT JUST DELIVERY OF ART AND PERFORMANCE, BUT SOMETHING IN THE CREATION THAT IS LOST – the casual conversation, the ability to bounce ideas off of one another. But arts educators are embracing the change. "Creatives are always going to be creative," Biddle says. "We've seen musicians shift. They're discovering a more pure form of their music – without the audience. In a lot of ways, that's what we're trying to do."

The technological innovations began as temporary solutions to what they didn't know was going to be a continuing dilemma. Performance venues, large museums, movie theaters and other crowd-gathering spaces will be the last to reopen, even as the Covid vaccine rolls out and public health restrictions lift. Monterey Jazz Festival, YAC and Palenke Arts all expect they will open their doors one day, with live performances again – and they will also keep the benefits of technology.

At the forefront of local youth arts organizations' missions now is making sure that they endure past the pandemic – ensuring there are future painters, photographers, musicians, animators and dancers to fill galleries and stages. Some of that is financial. Some of it is students sticking with it.

Students like Hanas and Kim say they're in it for the long term. For Kim, the pandemic has helped her crystallize a career goal. "Being alone by myself definitely gave me time to think seriously about my future," she says. "I knew I wanted to be an animator and storyboard artist, but I finally had to think about the schools and programs that would help me get there."

Sitting alone with nothing but her art helped her shift her perspective, making her want to do quality work – and on a timeline, like the weekly fan comics she's been publishing. "Without art, I don't know what I would be doing," she says. "I don't know if I'd be depressed, but I just wouldn't feel whole."

Hanas echoes that sentiment. She knew what the Next Generation Jazz Orchestra was in the Before Times, and she knew what it was like during the pandemic. But the latter experience didn't deter her. She's still pursuing a career in music, and today is a freshman at the Manhattan School of Music in New York.

"It was sad at first, being alone and not being able to play together, but it made me realize what music meant to me. The pandemic made me realize that yes, I am a performer, but it also made me look at music and my instrument as an extension of myself and how I express myself – even if nobody is watching," Hanas says. "Music to me was healing, and that's what we need right now."



Monterey County in the Time of Coronavirus



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Marielle Argueza

Marielle Argueza is a staff writer and calendar editor for the Weekly. She covers education, immigration and culture. Additionally, she covers the areas of Marina and South County. She occasionally writes about food and runs the internship program.