

For here is another reality of p:ear: For the two years that it has been in existence, Beth, Pippa and Joy have largely worked for free, living off unemployment and odd jobs. Although they managed to raise enough money to keep the program in the black, they couldn't spare anything else for salaries. The first year, their budget was \$80,000, but this year it leaped to \$186,000, thanks largely to an increase in individual donations as more people heard about the program. Recently, they were able to offer a small salary to Beth, who, by her own account, has trashed her personal credit in order to devote herself to p:ear.

And despite all the art, support and positive ideas, there are still days when they seem to brush up against one grim reality after another, when a girl whispers that she has been hurt by a trick and needs to go to a hospital, when one of p:ear's cameras disappears, when after days of sobriety, someone walks in clearly loaded. But Beth, Pippa, and Joy absorb it all without shock or judgement. In fact, they are all very Zenlike about what they can and cannot do for the young people who come through p:ear's doors. They can provide the space and the support for them to "create more meaningful and healthier lives," as p:ear's pamphlets say, but they have decided long ago that they cannot take on the kids' struggles as their own. They will offer unconditional support, and they will not judge. They will refer kids to other places that can help them, if their needs go beyond what p:ear can offer. But they cannot save them or force them to change.

They believe that is up to each young person to decide when he or she is ready and strong enough to take that step. Instead, they focus on the one thing they can control, which is what they can learn from the kids they help. As Beth puts it, "Never in my life have I been taught more about compassion and respect and forgiveness and the survival of the human spirit amid the grimmest of circumstances."

And so, here they are, opening the doors every Wednesday through Saturday, bank accounts be damned, because for every day a letter comes from Inverness, for each boy or girl who disappears for three months, for every story of a relapse or an overdose or a beating, there is this: Cory Colwell, razor-thin, 19, with a gap in his teeth and a shaved head dyed pink, who has, at Christa's urging, traded his jeans and T-shirt for a pinstriped suit in honor of First Thursday, and once transformed, vows not to take the suit off for three days—he couldn't care less what his friends think.

And there is the sunny spring day at the coast, a



field

trip—which the women of p:ear often organize to get the kids out of the city, outside their lives—and a young man everyone calls Junior, who has just been released from jail the day before, spends the whole time sifting through the rocks scattered across the beach. Every so often he will find one in particular that catches his eye. He holds it above his head, then hurls it to the ground, trying to smash it.

Finally, after watching him do this for over an hour, someone asks what he is doing, and he explains that once, when he was with his cousin, they found an ugly, unremarkable rock that cracked open in their hands to reveal a brilliant crystal center. He never realized that something so beautiful "could be trapped inside."

Every day, there is something that reminds them, as Joy says, that "this is where the potential is." On a recent Friday, a day p:ear happened to be closed, Adrian was wandering around downtown, trying to fill his day. He had returned to p:ear, but the first day back he had swept off his baseball hat, revealing a shaved head and eyebrows. "I got a little manic," he'd said. But he was feeling OK now, despite being bored out of his mind.

The night before had been First Thursday, and he had sold one of his more expensive paintings—the nuclear bomb explosion—for \$100 and had chatted for a long time with the woman who bought it. Earlier that day, Brent Wear had approached him about collaborating on painting, and he was still buzzing from it all.

It was warm out, and he decided to head down to the waterfront. On his way there, he ran into a young woman with whom he used to play hacky sack in Pioneer Courthouse Square when he first arrived in Portland. He hadn't seen Liz Fifield for more than eight months. Liz didn't have anything else to do, so she agreed to walk down to the river with him. They sat on

some steps, and Adrian told her about everything that had happened to him.

"See, I didn't stay a bum forever," he said.

"You were pretty level-headed," said Liz. "I figured you would get out of it."

"This is the second month in a row I'm paying my rent exclusively with artwork," Adrian said. "That's amazing," said Liz. "Where is this at? I have to see it."

Adrian rattled off p:ear's address.

"Wait a minute," said Liz and pulled out a piece of paper. "Let me write this down."

Earlier in the day, it had hit him that this was the longest he had ever stayed in one spot since he was 16. For the first time in a long time, he felt rooted. Tied to a place. He had First Thursday invitations to give out, people out there in the city with his paintings on their walls.

Sometimes it wasn't clear whether that frightened or excited him. "My life is moving in weird, wild directions I never thought it would," he said.

"The fact that I could actually sell a painting, that I could meet an artist I respect, and now I have a chance to work with him . . ."

It felt as if he was "standing on the edge of something." For a long time he had talked romantically about living the life of the wanderer. But now he had another impulse. Because beyond the images p:ear had inspired him to put on canvas, it had also encouraged another vision to take shape in his head: He could see it now, a place cluttered with paints and canvases and computer parts, a place where he could work on a piece whenever he wanted.

Not p:ear—he was starting to wonder, a little sadly, if he wasn't growing out of it, "like training wheels." But this would be a place very much like it, a place he hadn't dared dream of for a long time: His own home.

## THE OREGONIAN

### ART REVIEW: ART OFF THE STREETS p:ear

A DROP-IN ART CENTER OFFERS HOMELESS KIDS FREE PAINTS AND CANVASES—AND A GLIMPSE OF A DIFFERENT LIFE

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They are the city's lost children, wanderers in a neverland of concrete and brick. Come morning, they stir from the beds they have made in shop doorways, under bridges or on shelter bunks and make their way, beneath the weight of backpacks and plastic sacks and memories, to a building at the corner of Southwest Eighth and Alder in Portland's downtown. They push open the front door with a whoosh and sling their bags of possessions to the blue-gray carpeted floor.

From every wall, framed artwork blinks back at them. Massive, bellowing paintings. Small, urgent sketches. In a back room, stacks of empty canvases wait. Half-finished works nap on easels.

For the next five and half hours, this place will be their respite from life on the streets, an alternate world where the emphasis is not on what is missing from their lives but instead on what they can create. There is no sign outside to say just what this place is, but a table of beige pamphlets just inside the front door identifies it as "p:ear" and explains that p:ear is an acronym



for "program: education, art and recreation." But most of the young people don't bother with all that. To them, p:ear simply stands for a place where "I have no struggles," as 21-year-old regular Paul Allen Koch Jr., or PJ, puts it. "I can be myself here."

p:ear opened two years ago, the collective vision of three women—Pippa Arend, Joy Cartier and Beth Burns—who were once teachers at the Salvation Army Greenhouse alternative school for homeless youths but lost their jobs when the school was shuttered.

None of the women had a social work degree. None had experience running a nonprofit. Only one—Pippa—had an art degree. But all three of them believed, based on what they had witnessed during the years they spent teaching, that if homeless kids and other young people living on the city's margins had a place where they could explore their creativity and a gallery where they could sell the work they created each month, this exposure to new possibilities, new people and new ways of thinking could slowly begin to influence the future they saw for themselves.

That was the idea, in theory. But what happens when it's 8:30 a.m. on a weekday and already there is a line of kids at the front door, ranging in age from 15 to 22, sucking in nicotine and morning air, smoothing sleep-spiked hair, asking: Can I use the phone? And although you cannot see it, they carry with them crushing histories of abuse and abandonment: childhoods spent in foster care; Ritalin babies who grew up craving a new form of speed; children who sell their bodies to survive, and then stick needles in their arms to forget. How much can a paintbrush do? Suddenly, the theoretical is real. "Of course you can use the phone," says the



whippet-thin woman in cracked red patent-leather Converse sneakers, who could easily be mistaken for a teen herself but is in fact 32 and one of p:ear's directors. She is still a little breathless from the hourlong walk she makes each day from her Laurelhurst home to her job here at p:ear, a daily meditation, a measured transition between worlds.

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Beth Burns pushes open the door, and everyone tumbles into the 3,000-square-foot space, with its caramel-colored walls, high ceilings and windows that spill light onto the shelves of paints, pastels and felt pens, the row of computers, the two jumbled bookshelves, the filing cabinet of GED materials, the guitars and piano begging to be played.

About 25 young people come here each day—more than 325 kids during the past two years. Depending on whom you ask among the social service agencies that serve homeless youths, there are either (a) an estimated 2,000 young people who were homeless in Portland during the past year, or (b) about 400 young people who were on the streets on any given day.

Either way, it's a daunting number, one that a well-established network of social service agencies—Outside In, New Avenues for Youth and Janus Youth Programs—tackles each day by connecting homeless youths in the downtown area with job training and housing, health care and counseling.

Last year those three worked with about 1,000 young people altogether. But, says Dennis Morrow, executive director of Janus Youth Programs, "we know that not every kid is going to walk through every door." Kids who come to p:ear seem to be looking for something different. Some come because p:ear accepts kids who are too old for other programs and kids who have been kicked out of them. Some are drawn to p:ear's emphasis on art and creativity,



which engages them in a way nothing else has. The thing about working with homeless youths, says Kathy Oliver, who has spent 20 years as executive director of Outside In, is “there is no one size fits all approach. My belief is that homeless youth need multiple doors from which to decide to try and exit street life.” p:ear, she says, “is one more door.”

For everyone who comes through p:ear’s door on this morning there is tar-black coffee and plates of flaky pastries, and people just help themselves, because that is one of the rules around here. If you are hungry, you may help yourself. Someone is rooting around in the fridge for milk, and someone else wants socks. Then the volunteers—many of them professional artists, writers and musicians—begin to roll in. And Christa-Margaret Nelson, whose official title is operations manager, though really it should be den mother, is cleaning up messes and doling out hugs. Pippa, 31, tanned and strong and assertive, and Joy, 50, an elegant woman with a protective air, are there to greet everyone by name—or at least as long as Joy can stay away from her paperwork, which she works on in a cramped office area decorated with a sign that reminds,

“Change can be good.” As the morning chaos unfolds, Jean Garcia, a slight, wistful red-head standing on the edge of 21, sits in a back room quietly absorbed in the act of painting. She hadn’t painted before she started coming to p:ear two years ago—as is the case with many of the young people who come here—but she is a prolific artist now, churning out playful Paul Klee-like canvases with mysterious, winking names such as “Sleeping Giraffes.” She prefers to paint on salvaged gypsum board or plywood—“heavy materials,” she says.

While she labors silently, Joy notices a young man who has just walked through the door. “How have you been?” she asks. “I haven’t seen you for three months.” “I was in jail,” he says. “Oh,” says Joy, softly. And the mail today, like so many other days, will bring letters bearing the return address of Inverness Jail—more young men they know, also locked up. For drugs. For theft. And they will answer every one. The young man asks if they can help him take his GED examination—he took all his pre-tests while he was inside. “Of course,” says Beth. “We’ll even pay for it.”

Then someone is asking what’s for lunch, and someone else is asking for acrylic paints. And Pippa is gently touching the shoulder of a girl with chipped silver nail polish who is nodding off at the table over a bowl of oatmeal. “You need to stay awake,” she says softly. “You need to open your eyes.”

A young man in a black hooded sweat shirt pushes a red Schwinn bicycle through the door and leans it against a wall.

“Hey Adrian,” Beth calls out. “How ya been?” And here is what the reality of p:ear looks like, in another form: 20 years old, mohawk and wire-rimmed glasses; a high school dropout who earned his GED in no time flat; a self-proclaimed geek who reads scientific catalogs for fun and memorized the specifications of train engines, until he can identify the exact make and model number by sight; a Hunter S. Thompson and Hemingway collector, a computer hacker and a college-dreamer, who enlisted in the Army at 18, only to be booted out, he says, when they learned that he’d lied when he said he had no psychiatric hospitalizations. It’s been five times now, by his last count; depression stalks him.

Eleven months ago, Adrian Accaira hitchhiked to Portland from Colorado, where he had spent much of his life. There, by his telling, he had spent his late teens hurtling from his parents to friends’ couches to his car to motel rooms to city parks, and then back to his parents, only to fall out and start all over again. He was stuck in a rut, and he thought that perhaps running to a new city would break that pattern.

At first, he slept in a squat on an empty lot near the river. Eventually, he checked into a shelter, but it only depressed him more. Nowhere to hang a poster. No place to listen to music. He realized he was living a life far more restricted than that of most 20-year-olds, even though he was supposedly so free from responsibility. He longed to be able to take a girl out to a nice meal, to have a room where he could shut the door. The few possessions he had managed to haul around with him—his wallet, a laptop, a pair of boots—began to disappear.

He hated hanging out on street corners, “spanging”—asking for spare change—hated, as he put it, “the whole homeless scene,” but when you have no money and no job, you don’t go to school, and you don’t use, there aren’t many ways to stretch out the day.

And then someone from one of the downtown social service agencies that work with homeless youths suggested he check out p:ear.



The place overwhelmed him at first. It had no real structure. Kids were essentially free to do whatever they wanted, to follow whatever interested them, and the people at p:ear would help and encourage them. Other than a brief intake interview and proof that they were younger than 23 and homeless or transitional, there were no requirements. They could come and go as they pleased. They could go on a field trip—cross-country skiing, down the street to the art museum, or to Ashland for the Shakespeare festival. They could play Scrabble, or ask Beth how fractions work. They could participate in one of the occasional workshops on how to make glass tiles, beads or lanterns, or they could ignore it. They could ask a volunteer artist to show them how to draw an eye. Or they could puzzle through it on their own, and no

one would interrupt them and tell them they weren’t doing it right.

For p:ear’s founders, the voluntary structure meant that kids tackled things when they were ready, when it was their idea, making the decision—and its results—more meaningful to them.

Adrian had never painted before he came to p:ear. He’d always sketched, but he’d never had access to oils or canvases before. With all the materials available at p:ear, he just started trying things, teaching himself what to do. He

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spent as much time as he could there, and soon he was channeling his lifelong obsession with the mechanical, with computers and technology, into detailed studies of abandoned missile engines. The red haze of a nuclear explosion. A machine gun. Trains.

But Adrian, sensitive and intuitive with an often bitingly perceptive sense of humor (“I live in fabulous Portland, Oregon,” he wrote in the biography section of his LiveJournal, an online diary, “the land of Bums, Bridges, Discarded Heroin Syringes and Discarded Souls . . .”), intended the works as more than well-rendered facsimiles. Reflected in all of them was a sense of human isolation from the modern world. Isolation was something he understood all too well these days, walking through downtown, on his way to the shelter, past stores he could never shop in, past people who wouldn’t look at him. He gave his Web journal the name “imyourfault.”

One day, Adrian noticed a new volunteer painting at a back table. From the start, p:ear’s founders had recruited professional artists to volunteer at the drop-in center and work on their own pieces while they were there in the hope their presence would show that there were all kinds of ways to succeed outside the mainstream. That creating something could in turn create other possibilities.

Adrian recognized the man as Brent Wear. He had seen Wear’s work at a local Internet gaming center and gallery and had admired it greatly. Wear’s massive canvases were colorful

visions of a future that hummed with a vague creepiness—Wear himself has described them as “absurd children’s book paintings,” though not necessarily for children: sweet chicks with propellers on their heads, giant robotic birds looming over desolate landscapes.

Adrian loved the way Wear captured the natural and the mechanical, and so he was a little taken aback when Wear complimented one of his paintings and suggested they make a trade. Adrian decided to offer Wear a piece he had done of a bomb plummeting from the sky. Wear in turn offered Adrian the painting he had been working on—evil chicks with propeller heads. Before he left p:ear that day, Adrian stashed his gift near the directors’ office, where he was sure it would be safe until he had some place to hang it.

For a long time, whenever Adrian had let himself imagine what his blue-sky life would look like, he had cast himself as a college student studying computers or something similarly gearhead-ish. But the more time he spent at p:ear, the more he hung around with volunteers like Wear, the more he started to realize that his sensibilities actually meshed more closely with art. “The problem with techs,” he decided, “is they have no aesthetic sense.”

He began to fantasize about enrolling in art school. It helped that he was actually making a little money off his paintings. Each month for the First Thursday gallery walk, his pieces and those of the other young people who come to p:ear are framed and hung in a small gallery space next to the drop-in center. Each show also features the work of professional guest artists, such big names around town as Henk Pander and Nic Walker, whom Pippa fearlessly corners at art events. The kids keep 90 percent



of each sale; the professionals keep 50 percent. After selling three paintings in one month, Adrian decided art just might be his ticket off the streets. With the profits from the paintings he sold in March, he decided to rent a room in a house. He checked out of the shelter and hauled his remaining possessions to a white bungalow in Northeast Portland with a pink plastic flamingo and rows of liquor bottles out front and inside a constantly rotating cast of visitors until he did not know for certain anymore who lived there and who was simply flopping.

He finally had the door he wanted, the walls to hang things from, but it didn’t seem that different from the shelter in many ways. He knew a lot of the people in the house from the streets. He spread a yellow blanket on the floor, shut his door and decided to leave his painting from Wear at p:ear. Then he felt the chill of another depression creeping up on him.

For a week, no one saw him at p:ear. But that’s the thing about creation—it’s a process. Full of fits and starts, disappointments and set-backs, moments of doubt and insecurity. One day, the regulars watched as Pippa tried to paint a portrait of a man, only to change the background, the color of the man’s robe, even his expression, several times. But she didn’t give up.

