

Fishtown Artspace: A Creative Center on Cape Ann

Fishtown Artspace is a vibrant cultural center on Cape Ann where music, art, film, puppets, and outdoor activities come together to enrich the lives of kids and adults. The center represents Cape Ann's—and the North Shore's—traditional connection to the arts. At Artspace, art and life are inseparable.

Artspace traces its beginnings to November, 1994, when a small group of artists rented studio space in a downtown Gloucester building. The group began sponsoring music benefits to help pay the rent. In March of 1995, Shep Abbott, who operated a film and video studio in the same building, offered a portion of his studio on the third floor as a home for what was becoming known as Artspace. By that summer Artspace was offering live music every Friday and Saturday night and a video workshop for kids, while a giant tuna puppet marched in the streets and numerous artists exhibited their work in the large hall.

Through 1995 and early 1996, Artspace grew, eventually occupying the entire top floor of the building. Bands from all over Massachusetts began playing at Artspace, and Abbott—now the organization's executive director—realized that Artspace could serve a very creative and articulate group of young people. This nurturing of raw energy has shaped much of the Artspace image, provided a source of revenue, and has given the center a true sense of purpose. Today, the Youth Music Program is a model community program, and is integrated with arts programs for all ages.

In 2002, Artspace outgrew its downtown location and began looking for a larger, ground floor facility. Abbott and the organization's board found the ideal location at 50 Maplewood Avenue in Gloucester. After a year of renovation, Artspace opened in November of 2004 and now presents a full schedule of programs running seven days a week.

“The mission of Artspace,” says Abbott, “is to provide the space, tools and teachers to the community in order to facilitate the practice of art, including the fine arts, music, dance and theatre, both in our own space and in outreach programs. Artspace is especially committed to providing free art programs to low income young people, ages five to nineteen, who need both after school and vacation attention while discovering the wider world and their own free self expression.”

Artspace is perhaps best known to the general public for its live music program, which presents local and regional bands every Friday and Saturday nights. The concerts attract up to 5,000 teens every year, and provide a significant outlet for youthful creativity. “Playing in a band is great training,” says Abbott. “Young musicians who can keep a group together for two or three years while in high school learn about organization, working towards a goal, and team effort.”

The live music program also provides income for Artspace, which, because it is a nonprofit charity, must solicit donations and contributions from the community. “We are fortunate to have a group of private foundations that support us regularly because they believe in the mission of Artspace,” says Abbott. “We also have received tremendous support from the Cape Ann community. This month we are close to completing a matching challenge from the Amelia Peabody Foundation. They will match, dollar-for-dollar, every new gift up to \$25,000. I’m thrilled to say that we have seen a tremendous outpouring of support, and I hope that we’ll make the full \$25,000 by February.”

Contributions from the community allow Artspace to focus on its central mission, to provide free art and culture programs to underserved kids. One key benefit to the move to Maplewood Avenue was that Artspace is better able to serve a core group of kids from the Riverdale Park and WillowWood Gardens sections of Gloucester. “Free programs are our main

focus,” says Abbott. “We strive to reach across boundaries. We offer music, art, movies, and culture to a wide age range. We are becoming a regional cultural center for kids and adults, and we believe that all forms of creativity are linked.”

The range of programs is impressive. The primary mission of Artspace is to provide free art programs to low-income youths, ages six through twelve, scheduled after school, on weekends, and during vacations. Programs and workshops include the Artspace Portfolio Class, a free art class for high school students in preparation for art college, and Shep Abbott’s Art Workshop where students build puppets, paint murals, and delve into music. The After School Art Class is for kids ages six to eleven and follows the Artspace Dogtown art curriculum, while the Special Needs Art Class is for teens and adults. The Summer Art Camp is a five-week day camp with drawing, painting, hiking, and treasure hunts in Gloucester’s historic Dogtown.

Artspace has two performance stages and three music studios for live shows, band practices, and individual music lessons. Guitar lessons are offered for a fee. Artspace screens movies—documentaries, cult classics, and independent shorts—with its new video projector and Surround Sound. Staff and students design and build giant parade and festival puppets in fabric, paper, and paper maché. Every Thursday night, Artspace hosts “The Vegas Motel Coffee House” with music and spoken word performances, followed by a featured performer.

Artspace continues to expand and develop. “We are delighted to have a newly opened gallery space,” said Abbott. “We will be able to offer more art exhibits by kids and adults in keeping with our goal to be a comprehensive cultural center where music and art and film all have a home.” For more information about how to contribute or get involved with Artspace, log onto www.artspace.org or call (978) 283-1381.

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