

THE STAINED GLASS PROJECT

*“Windows That Open Doors”
by Joan Myerson Shrager*

History

This is a Philadelphia story with a cast of characters from diverse backgrounds reaching out to children across the world. *The Stained Glass Project*, of FUMCOG'S (the First United Methodist Church of Germantown) After School Program for Germantown High School students, began in 2005. It is a coming together of African Americans, African émigrés, Jews, Christians and Muslims, all working to make the world a better place for having been in it. It has become known as “The Miracle of Germantown.”

Paula Tracton Mandel, glass artist and Joan Myerson Shrager, digital artist joined forces to create an art program that would impact young people in Philadelphia through creativity. Together they founded the *Stained Glass Project*. With the help of Dr. Barbara Mitchell, Education Coordinator of FUMCOG's After School Program, Mandel, Shrager and a group of local artists volunteered time and money to start a stained glass class now in its fifth year. With “a little bit of help from friends” they have been able to keep it running so far. Their goal is to reach benefactors who will ensure its continuation, as glass and supplies are quite costly. Also it would be wonderful to have the Germantown kids visit the next school the windows will be sent to in New Orleans and continue to visit exhibitions and art installations as has been the practice so far.

Sharon Katz and the Peace Train

The original concept was to teach students to create decorative objects. But one day, Sharon Katz was performing at Germantown High School. Katz, (founder of the Peace Train, performers who promoted brotherhood and understanding in South Africa during apartheid) told Shrager and Mandel about a school she was raising funds for in her native South Africa. Together they came up with the idea that the Philadelphia students would make stained glass windows for Sharon’s school in KwaNgcolosi.

They presented the idea to the students who became intrigued with the idea of creating something beautiful for less fortunate kids. Although to begin with the student artists were hoping to use iconic American images, Sharon taught them that her kids in KwaNgcolosi had no TV’s, computers, cell phones or any of the technology Americans took for granted so we encouraged them to design windows with images they would like to look out at. Thus a link was established between these inner city American teenagers and children who face hunger and deprivation on a daily basis from a village in South Africa, many orphaned by AIDS. The Germantown students learned more than just how to work stained glass. They had a history and sociology lesson as well.

Changes

From the beginning, there was a noticeable change in the demeanor of these students. The usual teenage swaggering was replaced with open affection, cooperation and camaraderie. None had ever worked with glass before or thought of themselves as artists. Most had never been in an art class. Since the medium is inherently dangerous there was

a certain cache to working with stained glass. New skills requiring self-discipline and concentration were difficult at first for some. One student said this was the one place where he felt he could focus. New relationships formed as many who excelled in the process of creating stained glass, in turn helped less skilled students. Pride in accomplishment and self-esteem is clearly one of the greatest benefits of *The Stained Glass Project*.

Exhibition

In June 2010, 18 glorious windows, created by this wonderful group of high school students in Germantown were exhibited in a major Philadelphia venue, the Visitor Center in Love Park. The students received letters of recognition from President Bill Clinton, Governor Ed Rendell, the Consul General of South Africa, the Chief Cultural Officer of Philadelphia, Mayor Nutter, and the Philadelphia City Council. President Clinton said, “I want to commend you for using your talents to help others.” The South African Consul General, Fikile Magubane said, “Your selflessness will make quite an impact on the lives of the South African children.” Governor of Pennsylvania, Ed Rendell called it “such an inspiring endeavor” and said the students in *The Stained Glass Project* “enhanced the artistic legacy of Pennsylvania.” A visitor to the exhibition pointed out that these windows will be a legacy for generations to come, that the children of the student artists will be able to visit them one day.

Transporting the Windows

In August the windows were transported to South Africa and now await installation in Sharon’s school in KwaNgcensi. This was a story in itself as Sharon Katz led a group that included some of the artists who work in TSGP to South Africa so carrying cases were made for the windows out of insulation board and each person on the trip lovingly carried one window to its new home. The windows are now awaiting installation in the new school but the children who are the recipients were able to hold each window up to the space created to house them.

Morris Jeff Community School in New Orleans

The next chapter is already under way. When *The Stained Glass Project* students were asked for suggestions about the next destination for a new set of windows, Nanayaw Effah a talented student from Ghana said it should be New Orleans because of all that city had endured.

Contact was established with the principal of The Morris Jeff Community School, chosen by us for its record of commitment to diversity and excellence in education that goes beyond high test scores. Principal Patricia Perkins said the prospect of *The Stained Glass Project* making windows for her school is “very exciting.” She hooked up the Philadelphians with art teacher, Renee Rednour who teaches music, movement, visual arts and drama to 190 students each weekday. Rednour will help coordinate activities between the two groups. Rednour suggested all could communicate via SKYP but unfortunately FUMCOG does not have equipment for that.

Zydeco

For inspiration the Germantown High Students, were treated to a performance by a New Orleans style Zydeco band. http://www.sonicbids.com/epk/epk.aspx?epk_id=147434

One of the performers who actually survived Katrina and had been in the Dome talked to the students about his experiences. Philadelphia has become his new home. To the sounds of *When the Saints Go Marching In*, the Philadelphia kids with their artist teachers got a feel for the new destination. There was a whole lot of dancin' goin' on!

Conclusion

From Philadelphia's Germantown, originally settled by Germans and now one of Philadelphia's largest African American neighborhoods, to KwaNgcolosi South Africa to New Orleans, *The Stained Glass Project* goes "marchin' in" wherever there's a deserving recipient that inspires the student artists.

Cast of characters

Founders of the Stained Glass Project:

Paula Mandel; glass sculptor

<http://www.paula-mandel.com>

Joan Myerson Shrager: digital artist

<http://www.joan-myerson-shrager.com>

<http://www.facebook.com/pages/JMS-DigitalArt/160507043961003>

Sharon Katz, Founder of the Peace Train

<http://www.sharonkatz.com>

Wendy Quick: performer in the Peace Train and former Philadelphia Police Detective

Dr. Barbara Mitchell

Education Coordinator of the After School Program for Germantown High School held at the First United Church of Germantown (FUMCOG) <http://www.fumcog.org/>

LOCAL ARTISTS:

Michelle Mactavish, fine artist, renderer

Caren Borowsky, dance artist

Jillian Speeth, art historian

Judy Rosenbaum, designer

Gail Cooperman, designer

Theresa Blanch, glass artist