

Urban Ministry program brings purpose to homeless

By Michael J. Solender

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As Van Miller opened his backpack onto the table in the art room at uptown's Urban Ministry Center, nearly a dozen packages of freshly developed photos spilled out.

The photographs, Miller explained, were part of an ongoing visual journal homework assignment for members of his photography workshop, which is part of the center's ArtWorks 945 program.

Several program participants, or neighbors, as those who use the center's services are called by the staff, soon crowded around Miller to see their pictures..

Miller, a writer and photographer, has been teaching weekly hands-on photo workshops as a volunteer at the Urban Ministry since 2005.

He works with Harry Griffin, a visual artist and writer who also lends his talent and skills to the Urban Ministry's program, part of a gallery and studio for Charlotte artists who struggle with homelessness and urban poverty.

"During the course of my teaching and working with the folks here, I've come to realize the incredible talent and spirit so many have," said Miller. "I've learned that people I might make a judgment about in a split-second, in another context, have hidden talents and ... surprise and amaze me with what they bring to the table."

Griffin agreed. "Nourishing those affected by homelessness and poverty is about so much more than 'two hots and a cot.' Providing a sense of purpose and accomplishment brings out people's talent and strongly contributes to their self-esteem."

The photography workshop is part of the larger, ongoing help the center offers neighbors through ArtWorks 945. The numbers refer to the Urban Ministry's address at 945 North College St.

According to the program's director, Tyler Helfrich, several days of programming are offered weekly and include photography, printmaking, recycled art work, stenciling, furniture repair and even poetry.

"We are teaching creative problem-solving with this programming," says Helfrich, "We offer our classes from a strengths-based approach, meaning we look at people's skill set and build upon the things they do well.

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For information on the Urban Ministry's ArtWorks 945 program, go to bit.ly/artworks945

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This programming engages our neighbors in positive, constructive activity where they can see results."

Miller and Griffin have seen so many incredible photographs taken by their students during the past few years that they have set up an archive of the best shots. They are also producing a pocket-sized "Photoworks" book, a collection of color photographs with short narratives.

"We are self-publishing the book and have garnered a great deal of enthusiasm from our photographers," said Miller, who envisions a 40-page book targeted for publication later this fall. "This work has given me a subjective glimpse into people's lives that I would never get otherwise."

Miller and Griffin provide students with donated cameras and film and get the photos developed for the students through the generosity of a humanities grant and reduced fees from local retailer Biggs Camera.

Christina Williams has been coming to the center's weekly photography classes since 2010. Though no longer homeless, she comes routinely to "exercise her God-given talents," she said. Her favorite subject matter for her photography shoots?

"Still life," says Williams, "It doesn't get up and run away."

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