



Celebrating



### #3 The Blossoming of an Artist Educator

by Bob Kann

*"My Canvas is the Collective Illusion We Have of Being Separate from One Another."  
-Tia Richardson*

Tia Richardson first began working with Arts @ Large shortly after she graduated from the Milwaukee Area Technical College. She's completed approximately 28 residencies for A@L ranging from murals, bookmaking, paper-mache, and recycled art to jewelry making. With A@L's support and encouragement, she's been a full-time artist since 2014, and a much sought-after artist in Milwaukee.

#### Interview with Tia Richardson

##### How did A@L help launch your career as an artist?

I remember the first time I walked into A@L's former offices on N. Port Washington Road around 2007 or 2008. I had been laid off from my first full-time job out of college in my design field and was running out of temp opportunities. For years I wasn't interested in being a teaching artist, so I never thought twice about going there. When I went, I was told I needed to submit a proposal. I didn't know what that was. I asked all the questions I had, and they patiently answered every one of them, even offering to give me a template for a proposal and explain what the different parts meant. When I went home, I thought about what kind of art project I would create if I had to work with a school and that's how the idea to do collaborative murals was born. I figured I could get kids to paint together if I designed something based on their ideas that could be traced out. It would be fun, and I could figure out team-building activities I knew about as a build-up to doing the actual art. This suited me because I didn't always enjoy my art classes growing up, so I didn't want to teach individuals how to do art. I thought I could avoid that by having everyone share the same piece of art and do it together and it'd be easier for me to handle; I wouldn't have to grade separate assignments, and everyone would be on the same page.



It turned out to be challenging in its own way, all while helping me grow and learn all the things that have helped me do what I do today like helping people want to work together by sharing ideas. The biggest leap forward came when I had so much work coming through A@L that in the span of a few years, I was getting really busy. I discovered in my heart I loved working with people and the process of doing community building and art was so much fun. It wasn't only that I received good feedback from A@L. The response from teachers and students alike, and the community at large to the art they made was too much to overlook. I started to see something beautiful happen in me and outwardly that I wanted to grow and deepen professionally. The opportunities came to do more work outside of schools working with the broader community and with adults. That led to going fulltime as a community mural artist in 2014. It was the choice I made to step into that office back in 2007 or '08, the way A@L received me and accepted me. The freedom and many opportunities they gave me to experiment with my creativity ignited the spark that launched my career.

### **How did A@L provide you with professional development training?**

I remember attending several professional development opportunities hosted by A@L. In one I remember hearing other artist educators talk about their challenges with classroom management and others offered tips on what worked for them. For me, I got to listen to what worked and what didn't for others. It was a lot of listening to and learning from others' experiences. And there was such a willingness to share on the part of others in the professional teaching community and artist educator community. We were artists of all disciplines from music to performing, storytelling to visual arts and more. It was such a supportive community. I found that we were all interested and willing to share resources with each other and one way to do that was by attending some of the events hosted by A@L. I met some really great people that I found similar interests and enthusiasm about art education, that it could be way more interesting, relevant and fun than some of the experiences I had growing up. A@L convened those spaces in their gallery.

### **How did A@L help you develop skills to work with the community?**

There have been several projects where an administrator wanted their entire school to participate. That meant figuring out a way for hundreds of individuals across grade levels to have input into a design and help paint. The scheduling, the different interests and age ranges and abilities, the sheer logistics involved - that all helped me transfer those skills into working on bigger projects potentially involving whole communities. I figured out ways to scale up participation. On one project I literally had hundreds of little sketches from students and wondered how I'd help everyone feel included. I saw that many of them were duplicates of the same thing: the same animal or people doing a particular same thing.





I learned that if many people wanted the same thing, it only took using one of those examples and they'd still feel included. Those experiences taught me a lot. I would keep refining the creative process for other projects and organizations I worked with outside A@L until I settled on the one I use now. (I've worked other arts-based non-profits and after school programs).

### **How did A@L help you develop skills working with students in the public schools?**

This one was trial by fire for me. I had to have that initial drive to want to step foot into a classroom, number one, and number two, knowing there'd be a teacher in the room at all times was both a relief and put pressure on me how to perform. I sought input when necessary from teachers, learned by following their example of, say, ways to get everyone's attention. A lot of it came naturally as well, because I'd had three intensive years of experience working as an assistant in a Waldorf kindergarten that brought a lot of latent skills to the surface, like listening to and being able to respond and adapt to different needs in children. I'd had other experiences facilitating groups and learning from more experienced mentors through some of the grassroots organizations I'd been involved with in different communities.

What A@L did for me was encourage me as an artist to take the leadership position in a classroom, and they prepared teachers to hand over the room in a sense for the artist to conduct their program with students; the teachers would take a little step back while we worked, taking more of a supportive role. I found it built my confidence and classroom management skills. After each class I would take note of what worked and what didn't and adapt, make improvements. Thankfully the teachers had all prepped the students to some degree for the artist to come, so on most occasions the challenges we had were part of the normal stuff that comes with any classroom. Another way A@L helped that I found unique from many other places and orgs I'd worked with was it was expressly given that students should not be punished by teachers taking away their participation in an art residency on a given day. For example, in other places I'd worked it was common for teachers to send a child out of the room or have them sit off to the side and not do the activity if they had gotten in trouble earlier in the day or week for something unrelated to their behavior during the art residency. And they were encouraged not to do that, so often I'd get to work with those same students who were caught misbehaving when I wasn't there. And I'd see them shine the same as the other students, time after time, which meant I could build a rapport and consistency with the group that doesn't happen when the kids feel like their participation isn't valued. It reinforced the value I had that everyone who wants to, gets to participate and everyone has something of value to contribute. I have found when that

person wants to contribute and is withheld from participating, it impacts the group because they can't stay on the same page and keep up. The quality of the group experience also suffers. The morale drops, interest drops. That makes more work for me.

### **How did A@L coordinate school residencies for you and help you in those residencies?**

I think this was stated as far as how they offered support if I needed it throughout the residency. There weren't any major challenges that needed any big interventions. More like logistical support in the beginning and end. Once I got started, it was between me and the teacher, and the role A@L played with their leadership development went a long way as far as my feeling supported and empowered as an artist in their {the teacher's} classroom and developing materials that fulfilled their project goals both academically and creatively.

### **How did A@L help you find work as a muralist?**

Schools contact A@L saying they wanted a certain kind of art; if it was a mural or was in line with my proposal, then A@L would reach out to me asking if I wanted the project. Then they would schedule a planning meeting with me and the teachers and an A@L project coordinator. Sometimes they offered me projects that were not murals at all like building a paper-mache tree or decorating a raised garden-bed; and I would take them because 1) I wanted the work; and 2) I knew enough about the material that I thought I could figure something out even if I hadn't done it before. It wasn't too much beyond my level and the planning meetings with the teachers were an essential part of my process of figuring out how I was going to make it work. Nothing started until I had a solid plan from beginning to end (a proposal). A@L needed a detailed proposal so I had to lay out each step on paper; for the projects that stretched my comfort zone, this challenged me in new ways, and I learned about how to get things done.

### **Is there anything else you'd like to add about how A@L has supported your work as an artist or your life in general?**

They may not know this, but they have consistently been a huge source of moral support that has impacted my life. They've given me a lot of positive feedback over the years about my different programs that has helped my confidence in my creativity. They've included me in different ways such as inviting me to show a piece of personal art in their gallery as part of a group show; highlighted my projects in different ways (through video, their website, and photos). At one point I had enough projects going with them that when combined with projects I had with other organizations, I was almost working full time. Out of the many youth arts organizations I've worked with, I had the most residencies through A@L. I was sometimes balancing as many as three residencies at once. It allowed me to step out on my own and happened just at the right time when I wanted to create more career opportunities for myself independently. I had enough of a reputation at one point that I was getting work from many different places outside of A@L that allowed me to be full time, and I have been ever since.







## About the Author

Bob Kann grew up in Skokie, Illinois, but it happened so long ago that he remembers nothing of the event.

As a child, he loved sports above all else and could perform a standing back flip by the age of nine. His mother worried that reading nothing but sports books would stunt Bob's intellectual growth, but his older brother assured her that he would eventually read books on other topics (he did). Little did any of them know that he also would write several books including a book about a baseball player and another about an athlete who competed in several sports. Listening to his father's tales about growing up during the Depression, driving at the age of twelve to make deliveries for his father's store, and other stories of the south side of Chicago planted the seeds for Bob's later passion for storytelling.

Bob attended the University of Wisconsin-Madison, became a teacher, received his Ph.D. in Curriculum and Instruction from the University of Wisconsin-Madison, and later a Professor of Education at UW-Parkside and UW-Stevens Point. Shortly after becoming a professor, Bob realized he liked making his students laugh more than he liked teaching them. He recognized that what he wanted to next undertake was simultaneously entertaining children and adults since this seemed limitlessly interesting and creative.

In 1982, Bob became a storyteller, juggler, and magician who began performing for children and families throughout the United States. In 1985, he realized that being a former teacher/professor turned entertainer, he had unique insights into the relationship between entertainment and education. Hence, he began teaching graduate classes and presenting keynotes and workshops for educators and nonprofit organizations on topics related to humor, storytelling, creativity, and motivation. (Coincidentally, A@L CEO Emeritus contracted with Bob to perform at the PumpHouse Regional Arts Center in LaCrosse, WI at the beginning of his career. Bob continued providing great educational programming at various organizations where Sullivan worked and subsequently was one of the first artists to work with Arts @ Large in 2001.)

As a free-lancer for more than thirty years, Bob has developed many interests which have led him to produce storytelling tapes and write books for children, design curriculum for teachers, collect and write historical stories for nonprofit organizations, and apply his research skills as a consultant for social service agencies.

Bob believes it's easier to climb the ladder of success when it's lying flat on the ground. He usually can be found reading his favorite book on levitation. He simply can't put it down.