

## PROVIDER PROFILE

## Morning Program Gives Fledgling Artists a Place to Grow

By Robert Blair

To visitors at a museum, art means objects to reflect upon and perhaps admire. But from the artist's perspective, art is also a process. For artists, creative effort can be a source of self-esteem and a respite from the stress of life's daily challenges. Miriam's Kitchen, located in the basement of the Western Presbyterian Church at the corner of 24th and G streets, NW, offers its homeless artists a chance to experience all these aspects of the artistic process.

Every weekday morning from 6:30 a.m. to 8:00 a.m., the staff and volunteers at Miriam's Kitchen offer a hot breakfast to approximately 250 homeless clients, along with case management, legal, mental health, medical, and psychiatric services. When breakfast is over and the plates have been cleared, several of the large, circular dining tables are converted into what one of the participants, Eugene Talbert, calls "Miriam's University."

This morning, a Wednesday, the after-breakfast program has three tables devoted to visual arts activities and a fourth table set aside for a poetry workshop. The art tables are covered with decorated tablecloths, and six or seven participants are working at each table.

Some are painting, others are making collages, and others are drawing or working with pastels. Near the art tables is a bin that holds large folders containing many of the participants' finished works. Lauren Childs, a George Washington University art therapy graduate student, moves from table to table, talking with the artists about the pieces they are working on and encouraging their ef-



Berhanu-T-Berhanu, a Miriam's Kitchen client, sketches in pen and ink.

forts.

Catherine Crum, director of social services and the supervisor of the after-breakfast program, explains that the art activities are run as an "open" studio. Participants work on whatever they want, in whatever medium they choose. Some prefer acrylics, some prefer clay, and others favor woodwork. But everyone has to participate. No one is allowed to just hang out. "We have some amazing artists here," Crum notes.

The art program, which is in session from 8:00 a.m. to 9:45 a.m. on weekdays, has multiple benefits, Crum explains. "It's a way to let us [staff and volunteers] get to know the people we work with better. And for the participants, it's a way to express themselves in a different way, as well as a way to get outside their daily concerns."

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In addition to the open studio approach, the staff and volunteers also offer a "directed" art option. They can provide basic instructions in media as various as printmaking, photography and origami. The art supplies are purchased out of the program's budget, and George Washington University's graduate program in art therapy provides an intern who works with Miriam's Kitchen's clients.

What becomes of the fruits of this creativity? Some of it decorates the walls of Miriam's Kitchen's dining hall, and some is on display and available for purchase at the second floor café at the Whole Foods Market at Tenley Circle in Northwest. The Washington Legal Clinic for the Homeless purchased eight paintings by Miriam's Kitchen's artists as awards at their annual volunteer recognition ceremonies in place of the more traditional commenda-

tion plaques. And, in some cases, the after-breakfast artists enter their works in juried shows. Recently, for example, 20 pieces were submitted for inclusion in the mid-October "Outsider Art, Inside the Beltway, 2007" show at The Gallery at Art Enables on New York Avenue in Northeast. Of those 20, seven were selected for inclusion in the show, and five were sold. Some artists' works, along with poems from the poetry workshop, are made into cards sold to raise funds for Miriam's Kitchen.

David Pirtle, an artist, writer and activist on D.C. homelessness issues, got started here. He originally went to Miriam's Kitchen for the meals and case service assistance. One day, because no one just gets to hang around during the after-breakfast program, Pirtle was cajoled to paint by Jackie Durham, a crafts volunteer. He found he enjoyed it and has since sold several of his works through shows at Whole Foods Market and The Gallery at Art Enables. A number of his mixed media works can be found at the deviantART Web site.

Pirtle credits much of his recovery to the program. "What they do there is incredible!" he said. "The painting helps reclaim a sense of self-expression, which is so often lost when you're caught up in the day-to-day struggle with your problems."

Pirtle helped the Martin Luther King Jr. Library establish a visual arts program for homeless library visitors based on Miriam's Kitchen's approach. It has since expanded to include a branch library.

To learn more about the after-breakfast program, visit [www.miriamskitchen.org/artists/index.html](http://www.miriamskitchen.org/artists/index.html).