

Out of the Woods and into the Light: O. L. Samuels' Mentoring of Children with At-Risk Tendencies

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Abstract

O. L. Samuels is a well-known folk artist who began carving wood twenty years ago to overcome personal despair. Since that day, he has credited art with saving his life. Recently, Samuels shared his belief in the healing powers of art with his students at Florida Arts and Community Enrichment (FACE), a community arts organization that serves children and young adults with at-risk tendencies. Although Samuels is illiterate, he is a natural teacher who has used recycled wood, personal history, and dialogue to teach children about art and the environment. Working with Samuels, FACE's students have learned from his example of (1) paying more attention to the environment, (2) becoming more patient, (3) using art to soothe the soul, and (4) developing positive relationships. Samuels has served as an excellent mentor because he has demonstrated care for FACE's students, fostered their talents, and believed in their capabilities.

Along a Tallahassee main street, trees crashed down to the ground as workers made way for a new road. O. L. Samuels, a seventy-year-old self-taught artist, drove by and happened to notice a fallen tree lying next to a bulldozer¹. He immediately stopped his car and asked the man operating the bulldozer if he could have it. The man agreed and pushed the tree to the side of the road. The very next day, Samuels returned with a handsaw and spent several hours cutting it in half. Lugging the hundred pound piece of wood into his car, the artist envisioned how he would transform the log into a sculpture of a human figure.

Much of the wood in Samuels' sculptures is recycled. He has found broken branches on the ground, used discarded wooden materials, and reclaimed chopped trees. He explained why he salvages disregarded wood: [If] you think about a piece of wood that has been laying out in the woods, on the side of the road, and right away that piece, people may go look at it and go and throw it out the road if it's in the way. But they don't pay no attention with it, just throw it away. But if you bring this piece of wood alive [by transforming it into art], people going to look up to it and think. You get thoughts from [a] piece, you know. And, it's a lot of stuff you can get from that one piece of wood.

Samuels developed his passion for wood at a young age. Growing up on a plantation he became familiar with various types of trees (Moses, 1999). As an adult, he furthered this knowledge by becoming a tree sur-



Figure 1. Samuels and Erick talk about the sculpture that Samuels' made from a chopped tree he found by the side of the road.

dodman, a person who trims and shapes trees. Being high up in the trees provided Samuels with a sense of freedom, as if he were flying. At age 50, his days as a tree surgeon came to a sudden halt when strapped in a tree, a limb crashed down upon him and crushed his body. After the accident Samuels was bound to a wheelchair. The artist, who always valued his physical strength, felt hopeless and wanted to give up. At that moment he reflected upon his childhood when his grandmother, a former slave, told him to carve on a wooden spool whenever he felt depressed. Samuels heeded her words of wisdom and began to carve on a 2 x 4 piece of wood. In time, he recovered from his injuries.

Since first taking up carving, Samuels has developed into a self-taught artist, sometimes called an Outsider artist, by those who have written about him (Moses, 1999; Perreault, 1998). That is, he is an individual who has not been formally educated in art and creates it due to psychic necessity. Outsider art is driven by the artist's vision and conviction, grounded in the artist's personal experience. Dewey (1934) stated that artistic experience is ideally based on environmental stimulus and tradition. Drawing from his childhood and African American heritage, Samuels has carved mules, snakes, horses, African animals, mystical figures, and human beings. Additionally, an artist's work is often shaped by childhood experiences, which involve the influence of parents and/or other relatives (Garoian, 2001). Now a senior citizen, Samuels has continued to acknowledge his grandmother's role in making his life better through the creation of art. His positive family influence in making art supports Anderson's (1990) theory

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that it is art that makes life worthwhile. Samuels taught himself to carve as a means to overcome the frustration and personal despair he felt after his accident. In fact, the artist credited art with saving his life. Given his personal history, it only makes sense that Samuels gives unwanted wood a second chance at life.



Figure 2. Samuels taught his students that an artist invests time and effort to complete a carving.

O. L. Samuels teaches at Florida Arts and Community Enrichment (FACE), a community arts organization that is free to children and young adults ages 0-22. Many of FACE's students have at-risk tendencies due to impoverished living conditions and the large percentage of children living with a single mother. FACE is located in the Frenchtown community of Tallahassee, Florida, a struggling African American neighborhood

adorned with canopy roads, front porches with rocking chairs, and numerous run-down houses and buildings. While Frenchtown has its southern charm, it is also home to the highest crime rate in Leon County (Fletcher, 1999).

Jill Harper, FACE's executive director, invited Samuels to teach art to her students because of his excellent reputation in working with children. Samuels has never been trained as an educator and is illiterate; however, he is a natural teacher who incorporates hands-on demonstrations, positive reinforcement, and patience into his art lessons. Samuels has established a good rapport with his students. "Oh they likes me. The kids likes me." Because of his success as an artist and his ability to reach children, he has served as a mentor to FACE's students.

Mentors play a vital role in the community because they provide children with quality experiences (Garbarino, 1995; Tucker, 1999). Kelehear and Heid's (2002) research on mentoring school children showed that mentoring not only teaches younger children artistic skills, but provides them with an understanding and caring environment to learn in. A study by the President's Committee on the Arts and Humanities [PCAH] (1996) revealed that collaborating with mentoring artists from the community can teach children multiple forms of expression as well as problem solving and developing creative solutions in diverse situations. Youth who work together with mentors better understand their potential, discover new ideas, and develop solutions to their problems (Vygotsky, 1962). While mentoring FACE's students, Samuels has taught them about art and the environment.

Teaching Children about Art and the Environment

During his first lesson, Samuels introduced soap carving to the students. He started with this soft material because its consistency made it easy to carve. The artist wanted his students to have an initial feeling of success with their sculptures. Once the students mastered soap carving, Samuels taught them how to make walking sticks. He told them that the sticks had to be strong enough to support a person's weight and tall enough to walk with. To spark their interests, Samuels sent the students out to search for sticks. Once the children selected their walking sticks, they used real knives to carve them.

Samuels aimed to make the project fun for the students so that they would want to try their hardest and exceed their expectations. His teaching reflected Vygotsky's (1962) zones of proximal development, where students learn quicker and achieve more skills by working with an experienced partner. For example, some children were afraid to begin the project because they thought that they might mess up. To assuage their fears, the artist let the children know that he would remain by their side to assist them. But, he explained that he did not like to tell students what to do or want to do their work for them. Instead, he wanted them to follow their own intuitions. He told the students, "Now you do it and I [will] see where you went wrong at it [and help you fix it]."

Two elementary aged students, P. J. and Erick, took great interest in this project. P. J. explained Samuels' lesson: "First, he tells us to carve a stick real good and make sure that we get all of the bumps and green stuff like leaves and stuff that's attached to a stick." To achieve this, the students shaved the surface of the wood with their knives and removed the bumps and twigs so that they would not get any splinters in their hands. Once the walking sticks had a smooth surface, the students looked for the natural forms in the wood and designed faces on the handles.



Figure 3. P. J. and Erick take a stroll with their walking sticks.

As the children settled into their projects, Samuels kept a watchful eye and carved a wooden figure. This provided the students an opportunity to watch the artist's technique. While working side by side with the students, Samuels also shared stories and talked about art. To help them through the creative process, he demonstrated patience and showed them that carving

takes time. "I work at it as long as it takes. I just sit there and work at it."

Once the students finished carving, P. J. stated, "He [Samuels] tells us to put it down [the walking stick] and then take a break and go and get a glass of water or something." P. J. believed that Samuels asked them to take a break so that they would feel refreshed when they returned to their projects. After a moment's rest, the students completed their carvings by spray painting the sticks outside and adding details with glitter paint.

Reflecting on the project, P. J. and Erick explained that Samuels' lesson taught them about art and carving. They felt that the sticks were art because people carved them by hand. The boys also acknowledged that the walking sticks had a purpose because they enabled people to avoid tripping over holes that they could not see in the ground. Lastly, P. J. and Erick agreed that other children could benefit from this project because it would teach them how to carve a piece of wood and turn it into a sculpture.

Learning Valuable Lessons from a Mentor

FACE's students have gained positive experience about art and the environment while working with Samuels. Dewey (1934) wrote experience transforms people and exposes individuals to things that were previously foreign to them. Working alongside Samuels, children learn from his example of (1) paying more attention to the environment, (2) becoming more patient, (3) using art to soothe the soul, and (4) developing positive relationships.



Figure 4. FACE's students learn patience by watching Samuels carve works in progress.

Paying More Attention to the Environment

Lippard (1995) has made strong arguments against the shortsightedness of the American urban sprawl in which societies continue to tear down trees and leave older communities to decay. Seeing how Samuels transformed a piece of wood into a work of art may be a step in teaching FACE's children to value what exists in their environment. Reflecting on Samuels' art demonstrates that art and nature can be one. Samuels stated: "I say a lot of people look at art and don't see it. And some of them look at it and see it." Having worked alongside of Samuels, both P. J. and Erick have learned to see both art and nature. They have become more

aware of how they too can transform an unnoticed piece of wood into art.

Becoming More Patient

Samuels mentioned that it is important to occupy children's spare time with meaningful activities that engage their minds. He used art to capture their attention and, by working with them and on his own work in their presence, showed them how to become more patient. Samuels realized that some children become frustrated with wood carving because it requires hard work and effort to turn out properly. In order to communicate how to surpass their frustrations, he encouraged the students by showing them the large amount of time he invested in his sculptures. He explained to his students that they should be patient with their sculptures and follow the natural forms of the wood. "I learned the best pieces, let them come out like they want to. Just work on them." Another example of teaching patience is when P. J. described how Samuels told the children to take a water break while carving. Samuels showed the students that it was okay to stop working for a few minutes, return to work feeling rejuvenated, and allow the art itself to dictate the flow.

Using Art to Soothe the Soul

Believing in the powers art has on people's souls, Samuels shared his views about the healing character of art with FACE's students. The students could see how he used art to improve his life. Samuels has made a strong connection between art and human emotion. When describing the nature of art, Samuels responded, "It's suffering. Art is suffering if you think about it. Taking a piece of wood and creating it, making it out [into] something. I call it coming alive. Making it come alive." His example showed children that they can pick up a piece of wood or other materials and make art to express their feelings. Indeed, Samuels has confirmed that he values the positive influence that art has on humanity. "Art, it's something else. It's not just art. Art means something. And it captures them [children and adults]. A lot of people admire it. I do."

Developing Positive Relationships

Children who participate in the arts naturally talk about their work and children at arts organizations spend much time creating and discussing art (Heath & Roach, 1999). This open communication and interaction between students and their instructor provides children with stable relationships and predictability (McLaughlin, 1993). During carving lessons, FACE's students talked to Samuels about art and life. The artist also provided the students with positive reinforcement such as: "I know you can do it!" and "I like that!" This encouragement made the children feel good about



Figure 5. Samuels and Erick pose for a picture at FACE.

themselves and their art. Samuels further mentioned that he believes that children benefit from positive interaction with adult role models. "Well kids, I learned something when I was a kid. The old peoples talk to you and it may not soak in but they don't forget it. And one word, it may hit you now and last forever."

Conclusion

As a mentor, Samuels has taught FACE's students about carving wood, the nature of art, and the environment. Following Samuels' example, society can do its share to nurture children and the environment. Just like Samuels has given trees a second chance at life, members of society can help the environment by producing less waste and becoming more cognizant of the benefits of the natural resources that surround them. Furthermore, society can better the lives of children who are at-risk by paying more attention to them, fostering their talents, and believing in their capabilities. Many of FACE's students and others like them are at-risk of dropping out of school because they live in impoverished conditions. Having positive role models and support from the community can reduce risk factors (PCAH, 1996). Samuels saved himself through art and now is passing on this valuable lesson to children. Watching Samuels' example of his own life and how he was at-risk of giving up and dropping out of life after his accident has shown that people can triumph over difficult situations. Similar to the trees in a living forest, Samuels has demonstrated that children with at-risk tendencies who have additional support in a nurturing environment can develop the life skills that they need to become strong, beautiful, and resilient.

Notes

1. This paper results from the author being a participant observer at the Florida Arts and Community Enrichment (FACE) program. All information reported is the result of personal communication or observation, unless otherwise noted.

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