

Braddock Carnegie Library was an integral part of the borough's landscape before the Transformazium arts collective arrived on the scene. Constructed in 1888, the historic building, opposite page, was the first Carnegie Library in the United States.

An aerial photograph of a residential neighborhood. In the foreground, a large, multi-story brick building with a red-tiled roof and a small tower is visible. The middle ground is filled with various houses and trees. On the right side, a road with several cars is visible. A white-bordered black box with the text "COMMUNITY 'TRANSFORMAZIUM'" is overlaid in the center of the image.

COMMUNITY "TRANSFORMAZIUM"

THE ARTS TEAM TRANSFORMAZIUM
 CREATES PARTNERSHIPS IN BRADDOCK
 BOROUGH THAT OFFER INNOVATIVE
 OPPORTUNITIES TO THE ECONOMICALLY
 STRUGGLING COMMUNITY.
 BY CRISTINA ROUVALIS

Malique Dees, a soft-spoken 20-year-old, is out to make his mark on the fashion industry. As the creator of his own clothing and accessories, he's on his way to transforming his vision into a wearable reality. His first clothing designs come out of an unlikely workplace—a public library.

Inside the print shop of the Braddock Carnegie Library, he sketches intricate graphic patterns with the words “Edge Life” on them—the logo of his brand that he silkscreens onto his t-shirts, sweatshirts and other clothes. From only word-of-mouth, he's creating a buzz in Braddock Borough, southeast of Pittsburgh, where his friends snap up his original designs.

When he's not printing his clothing, the entrepreneur teaches other youth how to print posters, shirts and other items in a program called Youth Autonomous Art Zone or YAAZ. “Anyone can come here and express themselves and not be judged,” said Mr. Dees, who works for YAAZ on Wednesday evenings.

The youth program is just one way that Transformazium, a collective of three women who met in New York, has teamed up with residents and groups in this economically disadvantaged steel town to create community-based art programs. Embedded in the historic and cavernous Braddock Carnegie Library, they have set up the print shop, an Art Lending Collection, artist residencies, a family portrait series and other projects.

The trio — Dana Bishop-Root, Ruthie Stringer and Leslie Stem — has been working behind the scenes in this underserved community for eight years. Going in, they found a steel town with empty stores and boarded-up windows and a population that had dwindled from nearly

16,500 in the 1950s to about 2,000 today. They had an idea, but one that didn't involve foisting their suggestions onto reluctant residents.

Instead, the women walked door to door and asked people about their needs and the kinds of arts programs they wanted in their community. And when resources became available—like donated screen printing equipment—they hired locally, choosing, for example, to have Mr. Dees show his peers his techniques rather than have a professional teach silk-screening classes.

“I often think of Transformazium as a shape shifter,” said Janet Sarbaugh, vice president of creativity and senior Arts & Culture program director at The Heinz Endowments. “I think they prefer to be part of the DNA of the community rather than be recognized as a traditional arts organization.

“They are not an arts program represented by the formality of purchasing a ticket or entering a formal gallery. They represent a philosophy that culture and cultural experiences are everywhere, and they belong to everyone.”

That philosophy is why the Endowments has supported Transformazium's efforts for the past several years, most recently with a grant awarded to the library last fall of \$160,000 over two years. One of the projects the money is funding is the continued operation of the Art Lending Collection, which Transformazium started in 2013—just in time to submit it as a community project for the 2013 Carnegie International at the Carnegie Museum of Art. The connection eventually led to artists who participated in the International donating some of their work to the



Ellis Michaels, PA GenWeb, Allegheny County

lending program. Among the famous artists whose pieces can be “checked out” at the library are Pedro Reyes and Sadie Benning. The Carnegie Museum of Art collaborates with the Art Lending Collection.

The Endowments grant also covers the full-time salaries of two art facilitators, Mary Carey and Jonathan Reyes.

“I love my job. It pays my bills and it opens my mind,” said Ms. Carey as she flipped through racks of paintings and posters hanging on the first floor of the library. She has regular customers, including groups of teachers and a woman who comes in every three weeks to change up the artwork that fills an empty space on her wall at home.

To carry the message of Transformazium into the community, Ms. Carey circulates the art inside public spaces such as the borough building, the post office, the unemployment training center and high-rise apartments. Each month, she arrives with her arms full of canvasses. Passersby call out to her: “Hey, you changing the artwork today?”

New talent has been added to the collection through the Prison Project, which displays the work of artists incarcerated at the State Correctional Institution–Fayette. “I call them artists, not inmates,” said Ms. Carey, who managed the project.

The collective also supports artists by giving them space and resources. Jacob Ciocci, a visual artist and musician from neighboring North Braddock, held an opening as part of the “artist in library” series. He also provided an interactive demonstration of his work through a collage that he made available to the community by asking people to add to his piece. “It gave them a sense of being artists too,” Ms. Carey said.

When it comes to making connections between the community and art, Ms. Carey’s mind bursts with one idea after another, a torrent of words chasing her exuberant thoughts about how she can reach people in yet another way. She sent youth on a treasure hunt to research artwork hung in local businesses. She set out a notebook in the library that allows people to write or sketch. She talked about creating YouTube videos about art. Whatever she has suggested, the women in Transformazium have embraced.

“I call them Charlie’s Angels,” she said, laughing. “Those ladies—I love them. I have never heard them say no. If you have an idea, they will help you bring it to life.”



Ms. Stringer believes that Mr. Reyes, who often talks to residents of Braddock about social justice issues, and Ms. Carey are the reason the art lending library is widely used, with every piece of art—each given the arbitrary value of \$100—returned.

“The arts and culture facilitators are from this neighborhood,” Ms. Stringer said. “They are hired for their exceptional communication skills, their intelligence and the way they connect the artwork to the neighborhood. Being rooted here, they make programming that makes the collection meaningful.”

Over the years, the Transformazium members have changed their plans in response to community input and changing circumstances.

For example, when they first came to town, they planned to renovate an abandoned church and open an arts center there. But faced with the millions in renovation costs, they decided it would make more sense to embed themselves in the library, and all three women now work there. Ms. Stringer is the circulation manager; Ms. Stem is the print shop manager; and Ms. Bishop-Root is the program manager who wrote grants that enabled the library to hire staff to run programs, instead of relying on volunteers.

When Dipcraft Manufacturing donated the silk screen equipment in 2009, they approached the library about creating a screen printing studio. Vicki Vargo, Braddock Library’s executive director, was taken

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Vicki Vargo, Braddock Library executive director



aback at first. A print shop in the library? What would she tell her board? "That was a different idea for us," she said. But then it hit her. Why not? The space on the upper floor had not been occupied.

At first, few people came. "No one asked for a screen printing shop," Ms. Bishop-Root said. But when they told people it was a way for them to "get their thoughts out of their heads and onto the streets," people streamed in to create posters that talked about social injustices and other themes.

The paid art facilitator positions have enabled the library to offer a consistent schedule for silk screening, the ceramics studios and other programs.

The women of Transformazium are "a breath of fresh air for the community and the library," Ms. Vargo said. "They immersed themselves, got to know the residents and community, in both Braddock and North Braddock, and then suggested programming."

And they aren't done yet. A grant the library received from the Eden Hall Foundation funded GBBN Architects to develop a master plan for the library, with a priority list of projects, such as renovating an unused theater into an education center.

Transformazium also has made all the difference to Mr. Dees and his fashion dream. "This is what I want to do," he said as he sketches. "There is nothing better than doing what you want to do." **h**

Arts programs are now woven into the fabric of daily activity at Braddock Carnegie Library, with encouragement and support from Transformazium arts collective founders Dana Bishop-Root, Ruthie Stringer and Leslie Stem. Opposite page above, Ms. Bishop-Root helps a student put on a necklace she made during Ms. Bishop-Root's mixed media art class. Below, Ms. Stringer helps Jonathan Reyes, one of the library's art facilitators, organize the Art Lending Collection.

Clockwise above, Ms. Stem places paper under a silk screen printer while teaching the silk screening process. A student holds part of a modern art project created in Ms. Bishop-Root's mixed media class, and a painting by artist Natiq Jali is checked out of the lending collection.