Bruce Orr has been an art therapist at RAW for the past ten years. Bruce is a muralist and puppet maker. An accomplished public artist with work all over the North Shore, Bruce makes sure not to lose track of his imagination. He treasures comic books, games, cartoons, and sometimes his hair is blue. The most inspiring thing about Bruce though, is that he stops at nothing to make sure the kids in his groups know that they belong.

A sense of belonging is especially important in middle school. Middle schoolers are at a stage developmentally where they are figuring out their identities and are delving deeper into who they are and what they value. Many adults, when reflecting on their own middle school experiences, use the word “awkward.” This awkwardness comes from being between two stages of development, in a place of self-discovery. Bruce welcomes this phase with open arms, “I try to teach everybody to go right into their awkwardness because they’re not going to avoid it, so they might as well give it a big hug.”

In the summer of 2020, Bruce developed RAW’s first middle school public art group, WallWise. “I think it’s really important that middle schoolers are given a voice in the public...when kids are given a visual language, that removes a lot of barriers and it also unites everybody.”

This summer, WallWise partnered with the city of Lynn and Lynn Main Streets for their “Downtown Rapid Response Recovery Program.” The initiative is designed to engage the downtown Lynn community to help businesses that have been affected by the pandemic. WallWise created giant cardboard “neighbors” that were displayed in RAW’s front windows, holding signs and brandishing QR codes to direct community members to an online survey about the future of downtown Lynn. This project gave kids a platform to use their own voices, and hold space for others to speak up. WallWise has also collaborated with a local literacy nonprofit The REAL Program, and Salem State University on community engagement projects. They even designed their own playgrounds for RAW’s new exhibit, Find Your Footing, Make A Stand, currently on display in our gallery.

WallWise kids are imaginative, they are joyful, and they even have a group cheer, “What do we stand for? We stand for creativity! We stand for imagination! We’re WallWise!” While much of this stems from Bruce’s natural ability to create a playful environment, it is more about striking a balance between having fun and helping kids understand the impact that they can have on their community. All of RAW’s public art groups* show kids that they belong in the conversation and that they have a seat at the table.

When you are in the studio with the WallWise team, you can see in their eyes that beneath the masks, they are smiling. As you watch them work, it becomes apparent that what is most powerful is that they are creating as a team, and as Bruce explains, “…in being a part of a team, you belong. You’re accepted. Your voice matters, and we’re in this together to make things more beautiful.”

*RAW also has two high school public art groups, WAMX and Good 2 Go. If you have a public art project for any of our teams, please contact Bruce at bruce@rawartworks.org.
WHY MIDDLE SCHOOL? WHY NOW?

In the coming years, RAW is focusing on expanding our middle school programming for youth in Lynn. We have witnessed the transition into and through middle school as a critical time in which young people make choices that will move them forward or set them back. Middle schoolers start to ask big questions and begin to explore who they are and what they value. We believe that by expanding our programming for middle school youth, we can have a greater impact during this pivotal point in their lives.

In addition to our new WallWise group, and our long-standing middle school groups, Art 4 Girls and Boys Lyce, we have created new programs for this year’s middle schoolers. These programs include Frame by Frame, an animation group, and AMP Middle, inspired by our high school group, AMP (Art Motivates People), designed specifically for kids who are very engaged in the visual arts. This summer there were also six different Real to Reel Film School groups for middle school youth to choose from!

We are utilizing our art therapy rooted practice to engage deeply with this age group while also strengthening the pipeline to our successful high school leadership and college and career exploration programs.

RAW’s goal in expanding these programs is to ensure that we can support as many kids as possible in making healthy transitions into early adulthood. We believe this focus will not only profoundly impact our kids, but also the entire community of Lynn.

WHY NOW?

When a friend recommended RAW to Jacque, she had no idea the impact that it would have on her entire family. Jessica and her brother Jeremy have been attending RAW groups for the past six years, and their parents Jacque and Joe have been volunteering at RAW for just as long. Jessica, age 15, is shy but incredibly driven and has found her passion (and her voice) in both science and the visual arts. Jeremy, age 17, has been a dedicated filmmaker since middle school, participating in every single film school group that Real to Reel has to offer. Our Development Associate, Valerie, sat down with their mom Jacque to chat about our experience as a RAW parent.

Have you seen changes in Jeremy and Jessica since they first began programming at RAW?

I have seen both children become more confident and able to express themselves. Growing up, Jesse was super shy and really afraid to speak out. Working with Jacque and the Chiefs, who were patient with her, rather than insisting that she speak, helped Jess find her voice. Recently, she said, “Mom, I’m really good at science and art and I’m really passionate about the environment. I want to study environmental architecture.” She was brave enough to go and talk to someone and find an internship. The difference between Jess 6 years ago and now having the confidence to do that, I think speaks for itself.

Jessica recently made the transition from middle to high school. Do you feel that RAW provided support to her through that time?

Transitioning to high school in a pandemic was very hard, but RAW was great and Bruce was a phenomenal leader. Jessica did not start back in person (at RAW) right away and definitely was afraid of contracting the virus. Talking with Bruce helped her. He gave her the control to choose (when she wanted to return to in-person groups) and let her know what to expect when she came back. It was hard to be together yet apart, but she loved Bruce’s group and learning about sculpture. She chose to move through making art and used the time to find her voice.

Jeremy is now a senior, do you feel that RAW is helping him take his next important steps?

Jeremy is hoping to go to film school and pursue creative writing. He is in Project Launch, which is helping him define what he is looking to do post-high school, and give him some concrete things to consider. Launch has shed light on the college application process, which we are not familiar with. Rachel (RAW’s Filmschool Manager) is helping him get his portfolio together. She is a trusted voice that he can go to when he cannot speak to me. Right now he is very anxious about what the future holds. Transitions are really hard, and this is a big one. Having a safe place with a trusted adult for him to talk to is invaluable. It reduces stress to have someone in your corner who knows how to help with these transitions.

How has being a part of the RAW community impacted your family as a whole?

RAW not only has a huge impact on the artists who attend but the family and the community that surrounds them. RAW challenges me to think differently. It has been a journey of self-discovery. I have also had the privilege of being part of the Family Gather group where I got to experience making art at RAW with my kids. It was wonderful to make art as a family and it definitely brought us closer together.

Why do you think it is important to support RAW?

RAW changes the world. It is critical for the next generation to follow their hearts.
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* We are thrilled to have alumni on our staff and board!

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**SAVE THE DATE**

BASH 2022 will be Saturday, April 30th!

**BECOME A MENTOR**

Contact Project Launch Manager, Hebert Labbate, hebert@rawartworks.org for more information.

**SUPPORT RAW 12 MONTHS A YEAR**

Visit our website and learn more about becoming a monthly donor. Funds support free programming for all of RAW’s youth.

Scan this code to give a gift today!