

Giving Back

NYC SALT Gaining Momentum, Changing Lives

Alice B. Miller



JUST OVER FIVE YEARS AGO, *PHOTO INDUSTRY REPORTER* DEBUTED THE *GIVING BACK* ARTICLE series, which showcases photographers, retailers, pro labs and other industry leaders who devote their time, effort, finances and other resources to helping those in need.

That first *Giving Back* column focused on Alicia Hansen, an accomplished photojournalist who had been making a difference in the lives of underserved New York City teenagers in her Washington Heights neighborhood with a photography program called NYC SALT. The program, founded in 2005, is so named because salt “is something that flavors and preserves, and that is what we want to do in the lives of the kids we teach,” says Hansen. NYC SALT was founded to engage inner-city teenagers through photography classes and keep them off the streets; inspire them through the creative job market and college visits; and empower them by awakening hidden talent and showing them how to use their voices to contribute to New York City culture.

NYC SALT is taught by professional editorial, advertising and commercial photographers, editors and people in the NYC media industry. “It is our way of giving back to the community in a way that makes the most of our training, talent and connections,” says Hansen. “We teach the kids how to create great pictures and how to be entrepreneurs. We expose them to jobs in our industry, help them create college lists, teach them life skills, and help them navigate the next steps in their lives by engaging them in photography.”

Years of Growth and Change

Since 2007, the program has become a 501c3 non-profit organization, moved to a beautiful studio on 29th Street, grown from eight to 15 students, advanced 15 high school seniors to college, and gained a 10-member board, seven new volunteer teachers and generous funding. Alicia Hansen’s energy and spirit, business savvy and determination have brought unexpected rewards and changed the lives of many kids in New York City.

“Our biggest success is that all of our graduates have gone on to college, many as the first in their families,” she says. “They are on their way toward careers they



Photo by Devin Osorio, 19

fundraisers; they are important confidence builders. When the kids see their photos on the wall and people buying them, it’s a huge deal.”

In 2011, they held their first big fundraiser, a show for their first class of graduating seniors, at Neo Studio, a photo rental space in SoHo. They had more than 100 pictures on the walls, held an auction, and photographers Bill Eppridge and Joe McNally donated prints to sell. More than 250 attendees bought a lot of prints! They held a similar fundraiser in 2012 at Open House Gallery in NoHo. “This annual show celebrates our students’ success in our program as they graduate and go to college,” notes Hansen. “The kids and their families make authentic Dominican food for the events and a photo booth adds to the fun.”

NYC SALT also raises funds through individual donations and grants. The program is a grant recipient of the Guttman Foundation, Best Buy Community Grants, the Mustard Seed Foundation, the Lower Manhattan Arts Alliance, the Solent Road Foundation and the Cornell Foundation.

Since the program became a nonprofit, Hansen has sought individuals who want to give back by sharing their professional expertise and contacts to support the kids. “In addition to our talented teachers, we now have 10 board members, not all from the photo industry, who are helping to build the nonprofit,” she explains.

“One of our board members, Terry MacAvery, an accountant, does all our accounting. One member is a contractor whose construction firm, Conde New York, did the studio build-out for free. Another member, Ben Ascher, an architect with Studio G&A, drew up the plans for our space and donated the kitchen and bathroom appliances that were being removed from a downtown project. The board is the heart of our organization.”

In January 2012, Underline Gallery on 14th Street had a monthlong show of the kids’ work. “I feel like we’re starting to be known,” says Hansen. “At Photo-

Plus in October, I walked the show with Adam Chinitz, a still life, product, commercial photographer, one of our volunteer teachers. People have heard of what we’re doing, online and through word of mouth.”

Photo Industry Support

Lexar has been a NYC SALT corporate sponsor since the program began, contributing financially and keeping the students supplied with memory cards and card readers. Nik Software has provided product licenses; Epson, printers, inks and paper; Western Digital, hard drives; Wacom, tablets; Manfrotto, tripods; Drobo, drobos; Fujifilm, paper, ink and instant cameras; Kodak, paper; and Dugal, printing. B&H has given financial support and \$50 store gift certificates to each NYC SALT graduating senior.

Many photo professionals have supported the program. Gabe Biderman, who works for B&H, held a night photography and light painting class in the group’s studio. Keri Friedman at Lensbaby will give the students lenses for a month next spring. Jeff Cable, Lexar’s marketing director, has gone shooting with the students, taught classes and become a board member.

Enriching Lives

“Since starting the program, we’ve had 15 students graduate from high school and go on to college,” Hansen reports. “I never imagined building a program like this nor having such a huge group going to college. Kids who never thought about going to college are at amazing schools, such as the Savannah College of Art and Design, and Syracuse University. We have two

Gabe Biderman from B&H teaches a light painting class to NYC SALT students in their West 29th Street studio.

Photo by Danny Martinez, 18

never knew existed. Collectively, the students have won more than 17 Scholastic Art Awards in photography in the past two years. One student, Devin Osorio, was ranked in the top 30 in the nation for his senior photography portfolio. The students have earned over \$200,000 in grant and scholarship money since 2010 through their involvement in NYC SALT.”

Funding and Fundraisers

In 2009, through a grant from the Mustard Seed Foundation; the generosity of Trinity Grace, a local church; and a small show of the students’ work in the program’s studio, enough money was raised to buy cameras for everyone. “We’ve had about 12 exhibits since then,” says Hansen. “The exhibits are not only

students at each of these schools with full and partial scholarships. It’s amazing what inspiring kids with photography can do.

“As for my career, I haven’t had to market myself much to make a living. Thankfully I have great clients who love me and my work who keep coming back!” says Hansen. “I have sacrificed a lot along the way. Every step has brought a new problem to solve. It’s been a fascinating, life giving, exciting experience that I wouldn’t trade for anything.

“The kids have become our assistants when we have photo shoots, especially the college students. I have no doubt that we’ll stay in touch with many of them for the rest of our lives,” adds Hansen.

To support the NYC SALT program, visit nycsalt.org to make a donation or buy a student print; 100% of all donations received go to the program. □