

MoNA Moments presents SOMOS: A Conversation About the CCS Farmworker Center Children's Art Studio Program

Narrator: Welcome to Mona Moments, a podcast hosted by the Museum of Northwest Art, located in La Conner, Washington. The Museum of Northwest Art resides on the land of the Coast Salish peoples, specifically the Swinomish Indian Tribal Community. With gratitude, we honor their stewardship of these lands since time immemorial to the present day. This land acknowledgment does not take the place of authentic relationships with Indigenous communities.

This episode of MoNA Moments was recorded as part of the SOMOS: WE ARE exhibition in the Outside In Education Gallery, open from June 22nd to September 29th, 2024. SOMOS features work from the Catholic Community Services, or CCS, Farmworker Center's Children's Art Studio Program.

The CCS Farmworker Center provides a welcoming place for Skagit Valley Indigenous and Latinx families to connect with educational and community resources and receive support to become effective advocates for their community's needs. The Farmworker Center also provides a venue for cultural expression, enabling the entire community to benefit through the creation and exhibition of artistic works and celebrations. The Children's Art Studio Program is a free weekly after-school program in Mount Vernon for children and families to participate in art-making activities.

The exhibition, SOMOS: WE ARE, features a collection of diverse, colorful, inventive, and exploratory artwork and crafts created by the youth who attend the CCS Farmworker Center Children's Art Studio. In the studio, these artists, ranging in age from 2 to 17, have the opportunity to explore the use of art materials, mediums, and art principles at weekly workshops. The studio is their place. In this ongoing journey, the young artists are working together with teachers, staff, volunteers, and family members to articulate through art, conversation, and community the stories of their lives. This work, a culmination of a year of inventive, lively, joy-filled observation, is an invitation from them to you to come and see who we are.

In this episode of MoNA Moments, you will hear from Marta Martinez-Olivera, the CCS Farmworker Center supervisor, and volunteers Heidi Epstein and Christine Wardenburg-Skinner about the Children's Art Studio Program and the SOMOS exhibition at MoNA.

Interviewer: So, can you just introduce yourself and tell me a little bit about how you got involved in the Farmworker Center and the studio?

Marta Martinez-Olivera: Yeah, so my name is Marta Martinez-Olivera. I've been working for Catholic Community Services for the past eight years. I first came to work at the center through a program that was here locally, where I was able to intern for three months. Before that, I was working in the fields from age 10 till I graduated from high school. Then even after, between my college quarters, I was still working at the, in the fields until 2012, when I got my DACA and I was able to work legally in the U.S. That's how I went through that program to do my internship, and I got hired at CCS. Then shortly after that, our previous director, Sister Susan, and myself and my other co-workers started doing listening sessions. Out of all of those listening sessions, a lot of the parents expressed that they wanted after-school activities for their children that were free or at a reduced cost. So, as part of that, we did the art studio, and Sister Susan was the one that really connected with all of our volunteers. First, she contacted Patty, Patty Detzer, who was the first person that kind of got it started. Then she invited many of her artist friends to come and help us, and that's kind of how the art studio was born out of that need that the parents expressed, and out of the kindness of all of our volunteers who were willing to share their time and their experience and their knowledge of art with our families.

Heidi Epstein: My name is Heidi Epstein. I'm an art educator and have worked developing the studio, really, for about seven years. So, I do have a degree in art education, but the main thing that I got to do back in the 90s, for about 10 or 11 years, is be the art instructor and organizer for something called Circulo Di Mano, and that was a Girl Scout-sponsored art program in the camps, in the migrant camps during the summer. Several of us would get together, you know, 10 or 15 people, we'd go to a camp, we'd be there one night a week, and it would be like guerrilla art. We'd just make things, and in the end, parents came, the kids came, people were playing music. One of the camps did puppet shows, one of the camps did murals. So, when an opportunity came for me to do some work again in the Latino community with Patty Detzer and the Catholic Services Farm Workers Center... it was exciting to be able to work again with kids.

Christine Wardenburg-Skinner: I became involved through my friendship with Patty Detzer. We both did art work in the public schools, and Patty and I shared both a love of clay, because I've done clay for many years, and as has she, although our work is very, very different. Hers is far more sculptural than mine, and including a lot of mosaic work, which I don't do. But we shared a deep liking for one another, and when we went into the schools, we were just a great team. Patty is quieter than I am, I kind of was the spokesperson often, which is something she just hated to do. But she worked beautifully with the kids, and it was great teamwork. Patty frequently asked me to come in and work on Friday afternoons, which just proved to be not a good time for me. But finally, in 2017, in the fall, she asked me again, and I said, okay, I will do this. As it happened, it was just as she had the first signs of debilitating and finally a lethal cancer. So, as I began, Patty stepped back.

Interviewer: Yeah, and can you tell me a little bit about the evolution of the studio, like how it's changed over time and what it's becoming now?

Marta: So at the beginning, we were really happy and excited to get the program going. Then just having Patty and her knowledge, and all of our friends who were so excitingly participating in the activities, we were responsible for contacting our families and making sure that they made it to the art studio. I feel like throughout the years, it has only increased in the amount of volunteers that are willing to come in and help us out. Then also, a lot of our volunteers even purchase snacks for the children because we usually provide a snack. Then we're getting a turnover of kids.

We still have families that started out with us since the beginning, and many of their kids have grown out of the program, kind of, they no longer have that same interest anymore. But they have siblings who are little now and so they're still coming. It's always nice to now have even the moms, because the majority of the folks that come in with the children are the moms. So they also like to stay to participate in the program as opposed to before when they would just come in and drop off the kids. So now, they're being part of whatever activity that they're doing, whether it be like working with clay or doing their luminaries, the parents, the moms, are staying with the kids to kind of do the art as well.

Then the other thing that we have made changes this year out of Troy's recommendation was to do like a celebration at least once a month, so kids can kind of share their artwork and it's an invitation for the family to come in. Then we usually do like a potluck and we bring in snacks and usually pizza and then the moms just bring whatever they're able to, to kind of have that celebration and we're just eating and sharing and talking. So that has been really nice. It's something that many of the moms have shared that they really enjoy. Then so they're like, please remind us of like, you know, whenever the celebration is, so we're prepared like a week in advance so that we really know what to bring for the potluck. So that has been really nice to incorporate that as part of the art studio.

Heidi: From an opportunity to make a mosaic that began to have the people that came into the center work on the mosaic, then volunteers came, other teachers and talented people to work with the children. Then we actually set up a child art studio where we had shelves of supplies and began to sit down once a week with tables and chairs, and encourage the kids to use art materials. That's exactly what it's been like over the years. It's an encouragement. It's using materials by kids of all ages. So, a family comes in with a two year old, and a six year old, and a nine year old. They all come to the table and they're working together with art materials.

What we really wanted was for the kids, and this is what the Catholic services wanted, it's a community center. So we wanted the kids to feel this is their place. The studio's theirs. The work they do because they want to. Somebody is there to help them when they want to understand something about how to use watercolors, how to use crayons or pencils and what other things they might do if we just talked about ideas. So, that's kind of how the studio evolved.

It turned out that over the years, as we watched the kids grow up and see a three year old who at first would just come in and kind of yakking away and almost like somebody might say, like just throwing paint around. By the time she was six or seven or eight, she thought of herself as an artist. She is now as a, let's see, what would she be? Three and seven is 11. She, you know, she considers herself a well versed artist when she wants to express herself visually in any way. She has total confidence. I think that's one of the elements that the center really wanted for their children in their community.

We really hope for teachers and the volunteers as participants is to see these kids, you know, shaping their confidence, coming in after school where they've already been in school all day. They're speaking English, but at home, usually Spanish is spoken or one of the other Mexican languages. So they're bridging that gap all the time. They're coming back and forth. This was a time for them to relax. We'd always have a snack for them, they get paper, they have paint, they're in a place where Spanish is spoken.

Their parents were for a number of years. We actually had things for the adults to do. We have, and now it's still going on on a different day, but we have a center with sewing machines. So the moms would be using sewing machines. The kids would be doing art in a different room. Just that whole feeling that this is theirs and that what they make there is cherished, that they are cherished and that it isn't... It's a joyful thing. It's something, whatever they're bringing, whether they've been unhappy or happy, you know, this is a place to express it and to be accepted.

Christine: I think it was quite small when Patty started it, and I believe Heidi and Anita Ordonez both joined her almost at the inception. So when Patty began working at the storefront with the center, I think, and I'm not sure, both Heidi and Anita Ordonez, who's also worked in a variety of ways with children and had a very close friendship with Patty. I think, really, it was just those three and children. So what's evolved over the time, especially since we've moved to the East Campus Building, which is far larger and has a permanent good collection of all of our supplies, as well as a permanent collection for their sewing program. It's encouraged more volunteers to participate and they've kind of been friends of Heidi's, friends of Anita's, some friends of mine. We have an especially strong group of artists, compassionate adults to work with the kids. Sometimes we'll have more adults there than children on a day when there's something going

on in the community that we'll have two or three kids and four volunteers. But, I think what's evolved is a greater awareness of the program among the adult community and a steadiness of the children.

One of the drawbacks for the center is they don't have transportation. So parents have to bring their children or Marta, the director, will sometimes go and pick up children, but it's very limited. What we all would love to see is an expansion of the ability for kids to come and especially to find a link with the college, with their Spanish speaking students. So we don't know. I mean, it's kind of up to whoever takes on the next stage. But I know Washington state currently, because I literally just heard it on the radio, is investing in art programs across the state in order to foster and maintain art education for kids, because there's a kind of invisibility about the problem solving and the creative efforts of young children to sit down and produce artwork that serves in so many unforeseen ways of brain development, self-esteem, of a sense of pride that is far more valuable than is currently acknowledged, I believe.

Interviewer: Like looking forward for the studio, is there any goals that you can think of that you would like to see the program grow into or like big dreams you have for the program?

Marta: Yeah, so one of our goals is to really to maybe talk to the school district to have our site be one of like the bus stops or like a bus route, just because that has been an issue for many of our kids that they're not able to make it because of transportation. We don't want that to be a barrier. So, that's a big one to get ourselves on that list for the bus route.

I know in the future, hopefully through maybe funding or seeking funding, we'll be able to provide or find someone to help us full time just to focus on the art studio, because the art studio right now is a program within the farm worker's center. So along with that, we have other programming. Since there's two staff members, it's pretty difficult to manage what's needed as part of the art studio and then to divide our time along with other other programming that's there. So that would be great or awesome as a dream to be able to have the funding to hire somebody on board to just help us out with the art studio and make all these connections with the amazing artists that are locally here. Then, just for any other ways to make it grow and make it bigger.

Heidi: People pour a great deal of time and effort into the studio because they see the worth of it. Some of our volunteers, and they are exceptional people, gifted artists in themselves or successful in other ways who are committing a good deal of their time to come every week to support the studio. So, I'm hoping that committed group of adults will grow and that there can be some collaboration in finding funding for supplies and a commitment to stay there, because it's a big commitment, but it's one that is really very rewarding.

Interviewer: I was wondering if you could speak on kind of what you hope MoNA's visitors will get out of seeing the show in the Outside In gallery and the work that's up during the summer.

Marta: Yeah, definitely. I hope the folks really get to connect or just see the depth and the creativity and just the talent of the kids that are here. Many of the kids have never used or haven't been used to or introduced to the kind of materials that are being used here at the center. So, they leave learning new techniques that they learn from Troy and Chris and all of the other volunteers that even the moms tell us, you know, like, I see my kid doing this at home and I wonder, like, where did they learn this? And oh, they said that they learned it at the center. It's amazing to just hear that the kids are, you know, learning something out of coming here, but also just getting extra attention from our volunteers and individualized kind of attention. I hope that folks are able to see all of the love and just care that our volunteers are giving to our children so they can learn new techniques and share their culture through their art.

Heidi: That's a good question. I think the way we're putting the show up, I think the important idea that we have is in the title. We are, you know, come and see who we are, and the way we're putting the show up is almost to recreate the studio, the feeling that things happen here individually for different kids, and that there's just kind of this burst and exuberance of image making using color, using line, all the things that make up art. We're hoping that coming into the show, it will help people see and feel that quality of whether, you know, it's the volunteers, it's the teachers, it's the kids and the art material and how this all comes together and almost, you know, kind of not magic, but it's kind of magic.

Christine: I think the joy and the amazing detail that these children put into their work and the thought, and really the originality and the beauty of it. I hope that people will take away the fact that these children have been there over time and over years, and what they're seeing is the product of having access to materials, to experimentation. Through bookmaking, clay, textiles, a variety of different venues within the art world, and just the quality of the work that they produce. That's what I hope.

Interviewer: Awesome. Yeah, I was wondering if you had any, like, personal anecdotes or anything you wanted to share about like just being in the center or about someone, you know, coming, gaining a new skill or maybe a family that's gone through the program and now a sibling's in a program.

Marta: Yeah, we have two big families that are, like, their oldest son, who's now in high school, went through the program and then his sister, who's in fifth grade now, started the program since they were probably five, I believe. Now she's in fifth grade, and then now their baby sister who came in when she was still a baby and her mom would carry her to bring the other kids, they're still coming. Then through the years, the mom had another baby, which she now brings

in. At that time, she's now, I think, seven. So, we have like multiple generations of kids that have come to the center and they're continuing to come. It's pretty amazing to kind of see. I always tell them, I'm like, oh, my God, we're starting over, because I remember when you first brought your daughter, like, you know, she would always cry because she didn't recognize the place and she was scared. But now she just enjoys coming in and her mom says, like, she always gets mad. She says, she reminds me that you forgot to take us to the art studio and it was today. So, she says, I can't skip the days because they always remind me or they get upset when I don't bring them. So I'm like, well, we try to send reminders so you guys don't forget. And she's like, I know, it's just that it was so busy. I was making food and time just ran out and I just couldn't bring them anymore, and I was just eating it. It's OK. We'll be here next week. So she's like, yeah, I have to come or else the kids get mad at me when I don't bring them.

Christine: I'm thinking in particular of a child who came in with her family and often a whole family group will come in and they will always stay together. Even today, the families tend to be units as they come in. But this child was probably four when she came in with her older sister, who was a very excellent artist, very quiet, very self-controlled. This child was so hesitant to work, but when she did, her work was absolutely unique. What I've seen her do is just open and come in and willingly explore and that deep shyness and hesitancy. I mean, partly, of course, is getting older, but also is comfort in place, comfort with materials, comfort with her own sense of exploration and creativity. And I've seen that with more than one and children who started when they were three and now they're eight or 10 and their comfort in that creative environment. So, yeah, it's been very satisfying.

Interviewer: Yeah. Is there anything else you'd like to share with listeners of the podcast about the program, about how you've seen it affects the community or just anything that we haven't touched on that you would like to share with our listeners?

Marta: Yeah, so I would like to share that it's very important if they're able to either just donate their time to help us out. We're always looking for more volunteers. Any donations to support the work that we do would be amazing, but just to see the amazing work that the kids are producing and how creative they are, and to provide this space for them where oftentimes Troy and Chris designate how their lesson plan kind of in a sense. Then they give the instructions of like, this is what we're going to be doing with these supplies. Some of the kids are like, oh, I heard nothing, I'm going to do what I want to do. Then they have that space, that liberty to just be creative and do what they want with the supplies that are there. So that's really amazing. So that there's not a lot of structure in terms of like this. You have to create this piece with these materials. It's like this is kind of the idea. But you take the materials and do whatever you want to do. So that has been great. If there is anybody who comes to volunteer, we always have food, we have a really great environment just to be a part of a great artistic community.

I would invite people to come and join us, or just to come in and visit us whenever they can to see what we're all about. We would be happy to have them as volunteers.

Come to the Museum of Northwest Art to see the SOMOS: WE ARE exhibition on display from June 22nd to September 29th, 2024. Thank you for listening to this MoNA moment.