

## Chapter 27

### Brandywine Workshop: Printmaking and the Streets<sup>1</sup>

#### IN THE CITY OF BROTHERLY LOVE

Philadelphia, like many East Coast cities, is a complex mixture of past and present, old and new. To many who are not natives, this city, the place and the name are synonymous with the cast bell with a crack we call Liberty, and the Constitution. Say the name “Philadelphia,” and it is hard not to see the Bell, Independence Hall, the founding fathers. Philadelphia, the city of brotherly love, is a symbol, an American icon.

For the 1.7 million people who call Philadelphia home, the day to day reality of living in America’s fifth largest city is far removed from the pages of textbook Americana. It is the “City,” a place of work, industry, and skyscrapers, the home of the Phillies, the Eagles, and the Flyers. It is humidity, slush, thunderstorms they call “the five o’clock express,” and the turning of the fall leaves.

Philadelphia is also a place of neighborhoods. Some of the city’s older neighborhoods have managed to retain their social and physical identities despite the disruptive pressures of modern American urban life. Others though, suffer from decades of deterioration, isolation, and neglect. Plagued by high unemployment, failing businesses, violent crime, and drug problems, these communities have been written off by some in government and the public at large as hopeless and beyond salvage.

For those who live in Kensington or Tioga or Point Breeze, where the pimps and pushers and abandoned buildings dominate the cityscape, these symptoms of urban decay cannot be ignored. These community members have no option other than to cope and, if they have the energy, work from within to make a change. Many, though, are too busy

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<sup>1</sup> Unless otherwise noted, all quotations by Allan Edmunds are taken from transcripts of the AOP Conference held on August 21, 22, and 23, 1986, or from interviews conducted by the author in November 1988.

struggling to survive to join in the battle. Others, like Allan Edmunds, are fed by the challenges that have proved to be too much for so many. He knows that when you scratch the surface of a community on the edge, there are creative survivors to be found.

## **BRANDYWINE RESPONDS**

Allan Edmunds denies that he is the center of the expanding universe called Brandywine Workshop. Yet he helped found it 16 years ago. His artistic vision assured its innovative approach. And his continuing involvement is largely responsible for its successful growth and reputation. Edmunds sidesteps the accolades. Art and Brandywine are merely a means to an end, he says. They are a vehicle for responding to the needs of Philadelphia's inner city communities. According to Edmunds, art is a powerful catalyst for social change. Brandywine's accomplishments are proof positive of that.

It's hard not to imagine Brandywine Workshop as an inner-city life raft for the young artistic travelers who are fortunate enough to study there. The original printmaking studio was in fact established by a group of Philadelphia black artists who recognized that, as a result of their community's lack of support for young artists, they themselves were fast becoming an endangered species. They knew they needed a studio where they could interact with aspiring painters and printmakers in order to pass their fragile legacy on to the next generation. Edmunds and his partners also felt that the presence of such a studio where professional artists worked and taught as models of discipline and excellence would benefit the community as well. They understood that a community that did not value the arts would not support its artists, young or old. He describes his approach "very practical, not utopian."

When you are in economic disadvantage and social and cultural deprivation, you don't have a whole lot of time to waste with promises and long-term projects. You need something immediate. Art is something that is tangible. If you paint a wall mural, what do you get? You have improved the lot, covered up graffiti, people walk up and say it's great. Nobody has to analyze it. You start, you work hard, you pack up and move on to the next. In no time at all you have created a success everybody can relate to.

When he studied printmaking at Philadelphia's Tyler School of Art and then taught it in that city's public school, Edmunds looked for ways that art could change people's lives. How could art motivate his young students? How could it empower them, these kids that were his city's most neglected resources? How could art make a difference in his community?

The answers began to emerge in 1972 when Edmunds and other Philadelphia art teachers founded a print studio. It wouldn't be just another studio. It would be a resource for community development, a place where professional artists and the city's minority art students could interact. For professional artists, Brandywine would be a support system. For the students, it would be that all-too-often missing bridge between art training in school and apprentice study with a successful professional that could lead to a new way of life. Success at Brandywine would be defined in terms of artistic quality rather than economics. Community would be found through common artistic goals, not geography.

During its early development, Brandywine was supported almost entirely through Edmunds' after-school volunteer labor. Despite this and a lack of adequate funding, a studio was established and a program was set in place. The site, an old two-story carriage house in Spring Garden, was chosen because it provided easy access to the various segments of the community. Edmunds also felt the size (1600 square feet) and its commercial design would accommodate the workshop he envisioned developing.

Word of Brandywine spread quickly via the network of individual artists in the community. Through the Workshop, young high school and college art students began to experience what it was like to work with older, more accomplished professionals. The studio also began to establish itself as the center of a much-needed survival network for artists. Information about jobs, education, scholarships, inexpensive supplies, and studio space found its way to Brandywine to be shared among the growing number of teachers and students working there.

## CETA

From the beginning, Edmunds envisioned the Brandywine Workshop as a resource for more than just the visual arts community of inner-city Philadelphia. He felt that once he and his fellow artists were able to organize and begin supporting each other, their creative energy and collective talent should be shared with other community institutions and groups in need. Edmunds knew this "community outreach" was not a one-way proposition. He recognized that social change could not occur in a vacuum; that the Workshop's momentum would be short-lived if the artists did not interact with and gain the support of the larger community. Given that a community role was a priority, his primary concern was that Brandywine attain the highest artistic standards. He reasoned that the innovative community programs he envisioned would need a first-class professional studio to provide both a solid base and a

model for excellence. As a result, the Workshop's early energy and resources were focused on its students, visiting artists, and the sharing of ideas and techniques.

Ironically, Brandywine's first opportunity for community-oriented programming came as a result of the American economy's souring and the enactment of emergency jobs legislation. In 1974 Congress, concerned with a deepening recession and a rising unemployment rate, enacted the Comprehensive Employment and Training Act (CETA). This legislation made money available to city and county governments to create local "manpower training" and job development programs. A large portion of this funding went to create new jobs for the unemployed with community-based, non-profit organizations. Edmunds remembers the coming of CETA as a major turning point in the life of the Workshop.

"Really, our outreach activities started with the development of local guidelines for CETA. During the early years of that program, the eligibility criteria made it possible for non-profits to hire anybody who was unemployed. This meant that salaries were available to hire the unemployed professional as well as the unskilled. We went back and forth with the city CETA people to educate them about how the program could be applied to artists. It was radical for Philadelphia to be considering support for programs which treated visual art as a profession. We had to sell them on the idea that art was, in fact, a profession and that artists were workers who could provide public service."

Through the CETA Program, Brandywine Workshop created a project called "The Visual Artist in Public Service." The project made it possible for artists to work in schools, hospitals, older adult centers, and other non-arts-related sites. As a result of their positive experiences using artists, many of these social institutions sought and received their own CETA arts funding. They would eventually pick up some of their artists as regular employees. CETA also allowed the Workshop to train a core of artists who would become its teaching staff in later years.

During the four years of CETA's heyday, the Brandywine Workshop provided employment to over 70 Philadelphia artists. It also introduced a new concept of cultural work and citizenship to a relatively isolated and disconnected group of artists. For many, artist and non-artist alike, Edmunds feels a new community was born.

"The artists we selected were very special. Not only were they extremely talented in their craft, but they were sensitive and patient enough to go into these institutions and succeed where many others had

failed. Having had this experience, these artists were changed forever. They knew now that creators could make a difference outside the studio. They perceived themselves as public servants and that public service could be financially rewarding.”

For some community-based non-profits, the “CETA boom” went bust in 1980 when newly elected President Reagan and a more conservative Congress began dismantling the program. Organizations that had allowed the easy money to distract them from developing other sources of income learned a difficult lesson. Some disappeared. Many were severely crippled. Because of Brandywine’s strong volunteer base (which still included Edmunds) and broad community support, the Workshop survived. Although for some the legacy of CETA was a bitter pill, for Edmunds and his fellow artists it had been a giant step in the right direction. It had identified a large, previously ignored constituency among the general public that fervently believed in the role of art in community development. It had also generated a larger audience for the artists and their individual work.

### **PHILLY PANACHE**

In 1982 Brandywine initiated a project that both broadened the Workshop’s repertoire and its reputation. Recognizing that urban blight had injured the community, Edmunds began to consider how visual artists could help to improve the city’s physical environment. He and other Workshop artists focused their energies on one of Philadelphia’s most neglected neighborhoods, an 88-square-block area in the inner city that contained over 700 abandoned homes and vacant lots. Why not approach the deteriorating cityscape as one would a canvas, and create a sense of style, color, and beauty? If they could alter a neighborhood’s tacit acceptance of its ugliness, they might begin to change attitudes as well. This new direction was exciting to the Brandywine artists, but Edmunds knew they could not go it alone. He began by looking for partners.

“We called it ‘Philly Panache.’ I talked to the city department in charge of cleaning up and sealing these abandoned properties. I also went to the Pennsylvania Horticultural Society. I proposed to the Department of Licensing and Inspections that we employ art students and artists to paint panels for the doorways and windows of abandoned houses. With the help of the Horticultural Society, we would turn vacant lots into art parks and gardens. The idea was to create a summer work project for local artists and young people which would create a sense of pride and self respect for that neighborhood, and a recognition of the positive efforts of youth.”

Philly Panache became a huge success and remains so today. Brandywine's artists helped shift the momentum for an all-but-forgotten area of Philadelphia from desperation to hope. Since the project began, over 50 wall murals have been placed on the walls and hundreds of trompe l'oeil panels in the doorways and windows of dozens of abandoned buildings. With the help of the Horticultural Society, more than 80 gardens have been designed and planted as well. Each summer the growing project has provided jobs for the area's chronically unemployed youth. Artists as well have not only gained much-needed employment but have become recognized as stakeholders in the community's future. Edmunds believes that there are other benefits, less tangible but perhaps more lasting.

"I think the real key to the positive energy we have helped create is the art. The community and the people who drive through see all this work, all this beautification and conservation that is going on, and get the sense that the community itself is organized and trying to do something to change its image. This has a ripple effect because this in turn helps to enhance the larger image of Philadelphia, which contributes to the momentum for rebuilding which has begun to occur. The core ingredient is the visible evidence of the people's desire to see their neighborhood change."

## THE ART

Despite Brandywine's growing reputation as an agent of significant social change, Edmunds and his fellow artists believe that the Workshop's production of quality printmaking is the key element of its effectiveness. The artists' way of work—assessing problems and making change creatively—is the Brandywine model for effective action in the community as well as the studio. Brandywine provides intensive exposure to this way of work through the processes and products of the accomplished artists who hold residencies there. The Workshop's primary identity has always been as a education and research facility for printmaking. For Edmunds this orientation is not at cross purposes with a commitment to social change. He considers art and artist to be powerful change agents who have historically provided impetus and leadership for significant social movements. He feels he is reintroducing this resource into his community.

Brandywine uses a rigorous master/apprentice system to teach the art of printmaking. Well-known artists are invited to conduct "Visiting Artists Workshops" to small groups of young, aspiring artists. The students pay no tuition. Because the technology of printmaking so often requires close collaboration, the work of each partner, master and apprentice, plays a significant part in the eventual outcome. In a typical

workshop, the artist supplies the concept and the image, the printer and the apprentice, the execution. These roles are not static. The steady give-and-take of suggestions and ideas is essential for good printmaking. Once again Edmunds sees no difference between what works in the studio and what works in the streets.

“Self-discipline, skills acquisition, and a cooperative working situation are the primary objectives in our programs. The experience of collaboration eventually forms a predisposition to the building of networks among artists and among cultural and non-cultural elements of the community. Brandywine believes it can help train youth to be more responsible human beings by providing an outlet for individual expression and a chance to learn the skill of learning from their accomplished elders.”

Over the years Brandywine has become recognized as a national center for research and development in printmaking technology. Edmunds considers making that resource accessible to minority artists another key function of the organization. In his essay introducing the 1986 exhibition, “Contemporary Print Images: Works by Afro-American Artists,” he articulates both the commitment to and achievements of that effort.

“Artists are encouraged to experiment and to let a spirit of evolution guide their in-process decisions. Through this exhibition Brandywine presents its commitment to minority artists. The Workshop affords them the opportunity to express their own ideas without threats of censorship or questions of racial motives. The challenge is to produce a work of art regardless of social or political points of view.”<sup>2</sup>

## PHILADELPHIA CITYKIDS

In 1986, as Philadelphia’s city fathers were beginning their final countdown to the Constitution’s 200th birthday party, the artists and students at Brandywine realized that a significant element was missing. “We found that there weren’t many activities planned for local young people,”<sup>3</sup> recalls Workshop administrator Eleanor Childs. Brandywine responded with a project called “We The Youth.” It launched event called the “We The Youth Art Festival” in conjunction with New York’s CityKids Foundation (see Chapter 22). Brandywine artists and 50 cultural and neighborhood organizations aimed to enable Philadelphia’s young people to express their feeling about the

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<sup>2</sup> Allan L. Edmunds, from the catalogue for Contemporary Print Images: Works by Afro-American Artists, exhibit, 1986.

<sup>3</sup> Randy Giancaterino, “An Arts Fest for the Young,” *South Philadelphia Chronicle*, August 12, 1987.

Constitution's past and future. The one-day festival included "workshops and exhibitions conducted by local artists, a video presentation of the history of the Constitution, dance and theater programs, and a 100-foot-long scroll made of cotton fabric depicting the evolution of the nation's various flags."<sup>4</sup>

Another project produced as a part of "We The Youth" left a lasting reminder of the Festival's message. Working in collaboration with muralist Keith Haring, a group of Brandywine art students created a large wall mural which portrays the energy, creativity, and unmistakable presence of the community's young people. Painted on the windowless side of an abandoned home in the Point Breeze section of south Philadelphia, the mural rises up two stories from the street. It features the silhouettes of young people in a rambunctious celebration, rendered in Haring's unmistakable graffiti-inspired artistic style.

Both the Festival and the ongoing presence of this "famous" mural brought new visitors and new life into this mostly anonymous little corner of the city. The project produced a living legacy as well. Philadelphia City Kids continues today as the Young Artists Coalition, whose members work as interns in the Workshop and Philly Panache projects.

A summary of the events of the "We The Youth Art Festival" was included in *Brandywine Brief Summer-Fall 1987*, a Workshop newsletter. Though the article spoke only to the Festival's success, its concluding paragraph also serves to articulate the how and why of Brandywine's long history of successes.

"The success of these events was important for several reasons. First and foremost, it sent a signal to young people that their creative and constructive efforts will be encouraged and supported. Secondly, the events served as examples of ways and means of using the arts to reach our youth, thus building seriously needed bridges. And finally, the events represented exciting opportunities to commemorate the Bicentennial of the United States Constitution, adding a often-neglected dimension of public involvement that promotes future leaders."<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

<sup>5</sup> *Brandywine Brief Summer-Fall 1987*, p. 2. Philadelphia, PA.: Brandywine Workshop, 1987.