

THE ARTS|

Speaking Truth, Making Art: Amira Nuha and the AAASP

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MISSION STATEMENT: The mission of the Afrikan-American Arts Saturday Program (AAASP) is to build community around arts and artists of all ages; develop an appreciation of the arts and art production; foster a positive, energetic attitude toward creativity in a fun, mutually nurturing environment with eager, accessible mentors; develop skills that enhance quality of life experiences including vocations in the arts; promote teambuilding through mutually stimulating relationships and friendships; expose youth and the community at large to the rich cultural heritage of Afrikan-Americans and the Black aesthetic.

Like many organizations, the AAASP has lofty and noble goals, but how to achieve these goals and enrich and educate a community is the question. For Amira Nuha, the director of the program and one of its instructors, it has been a lifetime goal to use her art to educate and inspire those who do not know the rich cultural heritage of African-Americans.

The seeds for AAASP came from Nuha's earlier involvement in Chicago's Urban Gateways art and education program. Nuha led programs at libraries and schools in the Chicagoland area, performing and talking about her art and culture to students of all ages. After years of supporting herself as an artist in Chicago, Nuha moved to Champaign-Urbana. Soon, aware that the artistic climate in Champaign-Urbana was very different from the one she'd enjoyed in Chicago, Nuha took on a job with the local university to support herself while she continued to perform and create.

Shortly after moving to the area, Nuha was asked by a storyteller to assist her with an educational program at a school in Homer, Ill. "I got a stack of letters from the kids about how excited they had been about seeing the drums and the costumes and my daughters performing with me," recalled Nuha. "But when I was through with the performance I looked around and I noticed that the adults had this look of shock on their faces that said, 'What is this about?'" Nuha hypothesizes that performances that share real African American culture and art, as she believes hers do, put the onus on teachers to have a conversation with their students about things they may not be comfortable with. "One song I was doing was a Sweet Honey In the Rock song called, 'We Who Believe in Freedom.' It is always the last song I do." There is a line in the song that states "that until the killing of the black man, the black mother's son, is as important as the killing of a white man." When Nuha sang out that line at the Homer school she remembers "their jaws dropped."

Later, after this incident, Nuha read about the discrimination suit at the local Unit Four schools and the climate survey that was done in connection with it. Nuha was disturbed by the comments some Unit 4 teachers made that they felt they didn't need to learn more about African-American culture and that they didn't want to deal with the topic in the classroom. Nuha suggests that these teachers were saying they want "color-blind" classrooms. Shaking her head, Nuha says that she strongly disagrees with this view. "I appreciate the fact that I'm black and that I have a culture," explains Nuha, "and I want other people to know we have a culture and a heritage." Nuha feels this wish for a "color-blind" classroom stems from a trend in schools to only deal with African-Americans "post-slavery, as if all the culture and history we have started when we got off the first boat. To me that gives children a sense of shame. Who wants to be the descendent of a slave? There is no mention of our history prior to that, the rich history that occurred in Africa."

These incidents convinced Nuha that there was a need to bring African-American arts and culture to the fore in the community. Looking at the racial climate highlighted by the Unit 4 case and the lack of affordable artistic education for children in the predominately African-American "north end" neighborhoods, Nuha decided to spearhead the creation of the AAASP. "Kids need this, all kids," Nuha explained. Nuha has also taken the necessary steps to become CPDU accredited. All teachers in Illinois are required to accrue a certain number of Continuing Professional Development Units (CPDU) per year as part of their on-going education. Nuha took the time to become accredited because of her strong belief that teachers need the exposure to African

American arts and culture as much as, if not more than, the children.

The program not only aims to educate children about African-American art forms, but to bring the arts to African-American children as a viable career option. This two-pronged goal is well represented in the range of classes offered. Classes such as African Hair Sculpting, Hip Hop Dance, African Dancing and Instrument Making seek to open children's eyes to some of the arts of African culture. Classes such as Digital Photography, Jewelry Making, Video and Graphic Design seek to expose the children to artistic fields that they might not otherwise get to try. Far from being merely crafts to help pass the time, Nuha sees these classes as having another function: "The purpose of the art we are doing here is to expose the children to possible careers in art." The graphic design students are making flyers for the African hair sculpting students to advertise their new skills and the photography students are taking photos of their hair creations to be used in a portfolio. The students are encouraged to see links between the different art forms and to see entrepreneurial potential.

Nuha feels that this program "allows (the children) to be with artistic mentors who are nurturing, supportive and it allows for smaller (mentor-to-student) ratios. The kids can put a lot into it and get a lot out of it." The class schedules are flexible to allow as many students from different areas or on different schedules to attend, so that as few as possible are left out of the unique education that Nuha and the other mentors provide. All the classes are open to children from all school districts and all racial backgrounds at no charge.

At first, the program was conceived as an eight-week summer session, which would culminate in a community festival. Once classes got started in June, the initial plan of only eight weeks to prepare for performance seemed too short a time to Nuha, especially if the children had never deeply engaged in these arts before. The plan was revised. Instead of a performance, parents, teachers and interested community members will be invited to a free open house on Saturday, Sept. 14. All who attend will be invited to see what each of the classes have learned so far and watch the classes in action. Afterwards, there will be a lunch and a group dialogue time. It is Nuha's hope that teachers, parents and children will enter into a dynamic dialogue about African-American culture and its role in our schools. Networking between teachers and the art instructors will be encouraged to form plans for bringing the arts and artists into classrooms.

Despite these noble goals there have been and continue to be many stumbling blocks in the path of the AAASP program. "The struggles that I have had ... there seems to be a resistance to people from outside coming in with ideas, especially when you are talking about black identity, because I have been [mistakenly] described as a cultural nationalist," says Nuha. "It conjures up the image of not taking into account contemporary black identity. I don't overlook that ... I'm just connecting these things and showing the roots of our culture."

The other significant stumbling block has been funding. At this point the program only has enough funding to continue through September. The housing authority of Champaign County and the Douglass Center have both given their support but possibly for a limited time only. This has been a major concern for the program as Nuha points out that "this is the only free arts program for black kids." This, Nuha worries, will create a situation where only the financially well off will be able to provide an education in the arts for their children. "If you're someone like me who has kids with artist backgrounds and interests, but little means..." says Nuha, spreading her hands to beg the question. "I can't afford to send my kids to Springer for art classes. To me they don't provide the types of classes my kids would be interested in.

"I was planning on a year-long program, I'm still planning on that, and I'm hoping we can find some financial support from somewhere." Currently Nuha is trying to reorganize the group to file as a not-for-profit organization. The AAASP is currently searching for funding sources to apply for at the local, state and federal levels. Community support is welcomed in all forms. Ideas for funding as well as monetary donations are needed. In addition, more equipment is needed for some of the classes. The video class has three camcorders to work with but there are many more students who would like to take the class than there are camcorders. Donations of new or used camcorders would make it possible for more eager students to learn video skills. The graphic design class had hoped to put a design program on a Douglass Center computer so they could learn to edit digital photos and other skills, but permission could not be secured to do it. The program is looking for the donation of a used laptop so the students can continue to expand their design skills. "We are still looking for donations from any community member that may think this project is a good idea," states Nuha.

Reflecting on the program's rocky but passionate beginnings, Nuha smiles knowingly about all the people who suggested the program was over-ambitious. "I am not a gambler. If I did not think this was something that would work, I wouldn't have even attempted to do it. But I feel blessed because even though we didn't have the kind of money we needed to get it started, we had these talented people who were willing and able to donate their time. I think that it counts for something, that we have these professional people who are willing to come in and work with these kids and they are not getting anything out of it other than the satisfaction of knowing they are helping these kids and sharing their art," confides Nuha.

Last Saturday, as Nuha and two of her daughters, who are also instructors for the AAASP program, were driving to the Douglass Center for another week of sharing their skills, Nuha spied two of their students. "It brought tears to my eyes," she remembers, "to see two young girls hustling down Bradley Avenue trying to get to class by 9 a.m., walking fast, and it just made me cry because these are the kinds of children the program was designed for, kids who really want an opportunity like this, who will run toward the chance."

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