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H Is for Gentrification

Joe Englert gives third-graders a lecture on developing a club district.

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One sunny morning last March, nightlife entrepreneur Joe Englert gave some neighbors a sneak preview of his newest H Street watering hole. They inquired about his business model and learned how he planned to keep his sidewalks clean. Then they had recess.

Two Rivers Public Charter School, located at 1227 4th St. NE, specializes in Expeditionary Learning, a curriculum program created by Outward Bound. "We go really in-depth in one area, rather than covering many areas on a surface level," says third-grade teacher Sarah Garb. They have two "expeditions" per year. Last year, the third grade studied fossils in the fall and H Street in the spring. "Basically, the kids became experts in urban planning," she says.

The "experts" came up with some interesting discoveries.



"We learned that H Street was clean back in the day, not how it is now," says Emmari Lancaster.

"A riot is when everyone destroys stores," says Robert Primas.

They talked about what constitutes a neighborhood's revival. "I think it's changing over time with more quality in stores," Abriana Scales says. "I think Mr. Joe Englert is starting the revival," adds Peter Schans.

A Two Rivers parent suggested Garb reach out to Englert when the teacher started researching H Street's history. Englert was happy to spread his gospel; he and his business partner took the kids for a stroll, Englert says, and "we showed them dingy nightclubs." He then introduced them to his new restaurant, Dr. Granville Moore's, and chaperoned them around his music venue, the Rock and Roll Hotel, which is full of macabre décor. "It was creepy," Maude Branon says. Others were amused but skeptical. "It was good, but it wasn't really like a hotel," according to Abriana, who also found room for improvement: "It didn't really smell all that good," she reports, "but they said they were working on it."

Englert doled out business advice and gave them a lesson in Gentrification 101. "We tried to just stress to them that night businesses come first and day businesses come next...be it Williamsburg, Brooklyn, or the French Quarter in New Orleans after the hurricane," Englert says. "It starts with nightclubs." He also taught the third-graders some new vocabulary words—a "cluster," Tiaja Brannum says, is "when a group of businesses come and talk" to one another—and he revealed some of his plans for H Street. Englert wants to initiate trolley service, "because the Metro is far away," says Peter. And he'd like to improve the streetscape a bit. "They're going to put bricks in the sidewalk," says Christian Phillips-Gilbert.

Englert says he's used to sharing his entrepreneurial insights with friends, college students, and would-be bar owners. But talking to third-graders is refreshing. "The kids are great because they aren't embarrassed to admit they don't know something. They are so comfortable in their own skin," he wrote in an e-mail.

Before and after Englert's talk, Garb discussed H Street's history, dividing it into four periods. There was the early history in the 18th to 19th centuries, she said, when Pierre L'Enfant first laid out plans for the city. Then came H Street's heyday, when the street was paved and businesses opened. After that, there was a decline, which began when a streetcar stopped serving H Street in 1949 and continued through 1968, when riots engulfed the area. Now, H Street is having a revival, she said.

Asked about H Street's future, Tiaja says it's coming full circle. "H Street is having a U-turn," she says, "because they want it to look like it did last—last year."

MFA, Meet MBA

Matthew Sutton compares art school to spa treatment. The teachers are nurturing, the critiques are considerate, and the experience is, overall, cushy. Then you graduate, he says, and you hit “this wall of inertia. Nobody cares.”

Sutton, 28, graduated from the Corcoran College of Art & Design in 2002 and worked with Team Response, a D.C. art collective. When Team Response dissolved in 2004, however, Sutton suffered a crisis of motivation. “No one gives a damn either way what you’re doing. You have no critical feedback,” he says. For about a year, Sutton stopped creating art altogether.

Then, last fall, he hooked up with Gogo Art Projects, a brand-new program initiated by Leigh Conner, owner of Conner Contemporary Art in Dupont Circle. Gogo’s goal, Conner says, is to help emerging artists transition to the gallery scene. For Sutton, it’s done just that. In March, Sutton began “The Kudzu Project” and installed a fast-growing vine in the gallery’s front window. “I basically just planted it, and she let it grow,” he says. Six months later, it had crept across the gallery’s window and earned notices in this publication and the Washington Post. Sutton calls his experience with Gogo priceless. “You have a cheerleader who is checking up on what you’re doing...kicking you in the ass,” he says. “If I hadn’t had Leigh Conner doing that, I don’t think I would have made much art.”

But Gogo isn’t all about altruism, Conner says; for her it’s a business strategy. “We also end up with some pretty talented artists,” she says. Conner’s financial relationship with Gogo artists is the same as the one she has with other artists the gallery represents: The gallery receives 50 percent of any sales. The only difference, Conner says, is that she expects to do a little hand-holding along the way. “It resembles gallery representation. All the elements are there,” she says. “It’s teaching them what it means while we do it.”

According to Conner, Gogo grew out of the gallery’s Academy shows—annual surveys of student work from local art schools. The gallery has hosted these shows for about seven years, she says, and during that time, she’s learned just how naive artists can be when it comes to navigating D.C.’s gallery scene. “We were spending time with artists, talking about what does representation mean, how do you talk to the media, how do you talk to galleries, how do you balance that with working at Starbucks....What we found is that there’s really an opportunity for us,” she says.

Last year, she selected a handful of artists to mentor on an ongoing basis. She found some of them by attending student art shows. Others approached her about representation. There’s no formal structure to the program, she says. Instead, artists drop by when they feel like it, and she keeps an eye out for suitable shows. “It’s extremely important for artists to understand...the context their art is being shown in,” she says. “Not all shows are equal.”

Conner helped video artist Isaac Maiselman, 21, find exhibits to showcase his work. Conner spotted Maiselman's senior thesis at the Corcoran last May and asked him to participate in this year's Academy show (which closed Aug. 18), before inviting him to join Gogo. After being in college, Maiselman says, conversations with Conner have been a bit jarring. "I don't want to say it's blunt, but it's a lot less sugarcoated than you have in art school." The frankness, he says, is worth it. While the Corcoran offers an array of programs to introduce artists to the professional world—internships, study-abroad trips, grant-writing workshops, career fairs, lectures with collectors—art school can't prepare you for what it's like to be a working artist, Maiselman says. "It's a tough world to break into, especially in D.C."

Catriona Fraser, owner and director of the Fraser Gallery in Bethesda, says educating artists about how galleries work is good for gallerists, too. After all, she says, she's seen enough photographs taped to mattes with packing tape and signed with metallic pens to last her a lifetime. So, about twice a year for the last 10 years, Fraser has offered a seminar called "Success as an Artist." The course is six hours long, she says, costs \$80 and covers everything from pricing to presentation—all from the gallerist's perspective.

Some of Fraser's tips:

Know your gallery. "The one thing I would tell artists is research galleries to find out the focus of the work they show....I get approached by 10 artists every day," she says. "I want to be with an artist who has researched my gallery."

Make sure your gallery knows you. "Never, never, ever drop into a gallery unannounced and expect the gallery director to drop what they're doing," she says.

Get a contract. "Always have a contract. Never just have a verbal agreement," she says.

Don't pay to show. "Artists should always be with galleries that show their work because they believe in them." While "vanity galleries" are rare in D.C., she says, there are plenty in New York, and artists should keep their distance. "That's a big black mark, to show at a vanity gallery," she says.

Be consistent with your pricing. Fraser remembers a local artist who, a few years back, put a "ridiculous" price on her artwork. When a collector bought the piece at the inflated price, she says, the artist was caught in a Catch-22. She couldn't lower her prices for fear of offending the collector, and she couldn't get other buyers to bite. "If you overprice, you have to keep it overpriced," she says. "That's why, when it comes to pricing, you have to be consistent."

Don't underestimate D.C.'s close-knit gallery world. "Never, ever undercut your gallery or sell behind your gallery's back," she says. "The galleries always find out, especially in D.C."