

## Building self-confidence through art

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By Wendy Killeen, Globe Correspondent | May 11, 2008

After more than a decade of renting space in downtown Lynn, Raw Art Works - an arts therapy program for at-risk youth - now owns the building and is opening its first public gallery on the ground floor.

"There are so many people in the area who don't know we exist," said Mary Flannery, who founded RAW in 1988 and moved the nonprofit to Lynn in 1994. "And we are a nationally known organization. We'll get tremendous exposure being on the ground floor."

The gallery opened Thursday with a show of work by RAW artists called "Reach." Its annual fund-raiser - the one night a year work by RAW students and alumni is put up for sale - is Saturday.

The idea behind RAW is that children and teenagers, ages 6 to 19, create artwork and develop self-confidence and life skills through 20 free programs led by artists and art therapists.

There are visual arts groups, a film school, mentoring and leadership programs, and a college preparation program. More than 400 young people attend RAW's weekly groups and another 300 participate in outreach programs.

The move to buy the building at 37 Central Square began when the city's Economic Development and Industrial Corporation, which owned and occupied part of the building, decided to sell.

"We were going to be homeless," Flannery said of RAW, which rented the top floors. "So we decided to throw our hat in the ring. Our financial management is excellent, so when we started going to banks, the answer was 'Yes, we will loan you money.' "

After RAW secured the loan, it raised \$1.2 million to cover the \$470,000 purchase price of the building and extensive renovations, which are continuing. The loan was repaid in March 2007.

Peter DeVeau, former executive director of the Economic and Industrial Corporation, applauded RAW's efforts. "It's a real achievement for a Lynn organization to raise that much money," he said. "And they not only raised the money, but put it to good use. I'm proud of what they have done with the building."

DeVeau added that RAW was a good fit "because of what the city is trying to achieve downtown in terms of creating arts and culture."

In recent years, artists and cultural organizations have been key to revitalization efforts in Central Square that have spawned development, drawn new residents to loft apartments, and attracted businesses, restaurants, and cafes.

And now there's RAW's first public gallery, a large, open, bright, and welcoming space designed by architect Dan Hisel of Somerville.

The gallery has multiple uses, offering space for exhibits, studio work, and community and special events. It also has a translucent movie screen that can be pulled down from the ceiling in front of the gallery's 10-foot-by-15-foot windows, allowing people to view films from inside and outside the building simultaneously. Showings will feature the work of students in RAW's Real 2 Reel Film School.

RAW, which has produced one show of student art a year, will now be able to present a second show and host a visiting artist who will do workshops with the children and also exhibit his or her art.

Hisel, who worked for a reduced fee, said he instantly fell in love with RAW. "If you come within a 10-mile radius of the place, you get swept up by the energy there and the good work they are doing," he said. "And the art is incredible."

RAW's young artists are also excited about the new gallery. "The space is awesome for us," said Alex Gilligan, 16, of Salem, a member of the group Women 2 Be, "because it will bring more people in from the outside and show them what we are all about. And it creates new space for people to come in, and work that is bigger and brighter. This place is like home for the majority of us, so by shaping it up, it's like getting a renovation on your home, which is really nice."

"Reach," at Raw Art Works, 37 Central Square, Lynn, runs through December. The gallery is open by appointment

through the summer, and Tuesday through Friday, 10 a.m.-3 p.m., beginning in September. Raw's fund-raiser, BASH! Party with a Purpose, is Saturday, 7-11:30 p.m. It features the auction of 50 pieces of art, screenings of films by Real 2 Reel Film School students, music, and hors d'oeuvres. Tickets are \$40 and available online at [rawart.org](http://rawart.org). ■

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