

# Making connections

Local nonprofit connects artists with good causes

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For the past 11 years, local nonprofit The Art Connection has been living up to its name: It does, in fact, make connections.

The premise of the organization, which is housed in the Boston Center for the Arts, is extremely simple: Artists frequently have unsold art stockpiled in their homes and studios, taking up space and above all, not being seen. Most nonprofits and social service agencies don't have the budget to spend on fine art for their walls, often times leaving their most people-oriented spaces barren, color-less and art-less places. Enter The Art Connection, which, with a digital portfolio that now boasts a large number of works available, acts as an intermediary, facilitating a donation of art.

"It's kind of a win-win situation for both the artist and the agency," explained the organization's executive director, Jim McDonald. "The agency is able to acquire art without creating a budget and the artist... is able to move inventory and have their work appreciated by new audiences."

This simple idea came from local artist Fay Chandler, who at the age of 40 picked up a paintbrush and began to create. Some years later, Chandler came to the realization that she simply had too much art – her own – laying around the

studio and that it was time to get rid of some of it. In 1994, she held a large exhibition in the BCA's Cyclorama and at the end of it, she invited several area nonprofits to come in and choose whatever art they wanted. From there, realizing that frequent large exhibitions would simply be too unwieldy to disseminate art effectively, Chandler had the idea of a kind of warehouse of donated art, from which individual pieces could be matched to individual agencies.

"Fay was just brilliant about getting the right people there initially," said McDonald, adding that putting the intermediary's framework in place took some time and was largely the work of volunteers – especially volunteers who were willing to lug a heavy slide projection machine from nonprofit to nonprofit, helping to match agencies with art.

Since then, The Art Connection has grown by leaps and bounds. No more slide projector, now art is visually housed in a digital warehouse easily transported from site to site on a laptop. Where once work was done by volunteers, mostly artists, The Art Connection now boasts three paid employees – two part time and one executive director. Chandler, now 84, remains on the Board of Directors. And now, works provided by The Art Connection dot the South End nonprofit landscape, from the Boston Living Center, to Rosie's Place, to Pine Street Inn, to the Salvation Army's Harbor Light Center, to United South End Settlement's Harriet Tubman House, to the South End Community Health Center. More than 250 organizations in the greater Boston area have applied for and received artwork, and around 175 artists have partnered with the organization to donate more than 4000 pieces.

Local South End artist Ken Beck, who has lived and worked in the Piano Factory since 1981, is one of those artists, and he's been involved with the organization essentially since its inception.



"Some Do's and More Don'ts (CopKids)' by artist John Schulz, now on permanent display at the Boston Senior Home Care.

A series of 10 lithographs by him are currently living at Children's Services of Roxbury, and, he says, he's giving serious thought to what pieces he'll donate next.

"It fulfills a lot of purposes," he said of the program. "One of them is that there is not enough art in public spaces... and from an artist's perspective, I want people to be looking at art as often possible." In addition to bringing art – and the evaluation of art – to a wider audience, Beck says that he also appreciates the process by which agencies choose the art they receive.

"It's also very important that the agencies make the decision, it isn't just 'Here's a painting, here it is,'" he said. "They make the decision."

And it is a lengthy process, taking around three or four months to work through it: Agencies apply, individuals from The Art Connection

visit the site, and then show the agency no more than 200 works of art. No more than 200, McDonald said, because more than that becomes overwhelming.

After all the pieces have been seen by what McDonald called a "critical mass" of the agency's employees, board members, staff, and clients, they then whittle them down to about 40. And then comes the hard part – cutting down that group to the 10 to 15 pieces that will ultimately become part of their facilities. "That takes a little time," McDonald said.

But it is worth it. "It ensures a better fit between the art and the public that is going to be receiving it," Beck said of the process. And in general, he said, the whole program is a very successful one, and well-supported by area artists. Said Beck, "It's just a good idea."