



Mosaic School

Reflecting on a Special Program and Special Students

by Shawn Newton

Photography by the Atelier Team

In January 2013, the Atelier del Mosaico de Puerto Rico began a new and very unique tradition. Already known for its entertaining workshops, educational exhibitions, and innovative community programs, a new challenge was presented to founder and artist, Luis Alberto Rivera. School occupational therapist, Lillian Rosa, requested the organization of a mosaic workshop for “Room 108” at Antilles High School in Fort Buchanan, Puerto Rico.

This special group of students, who deal with autistic conditions characterized by challenges in social discourse and communications, had so much to offer within their quiet hearts. Rosa was guessing that mosaic art could have the power to unlock social interaction for them. After interviewing the children along with their educational technicians, a group project was proposed.

Artistic Growth and Success

It did not take long for hosts Rivera, Helga Maribel Sánchez, project coordinator Awilda Pantojas, Jerry Irizarry, and Loraine Colon to see the capability and willingness emanating from each student at the Atelier. They learned to create proper compositions, cut tiles and glass, and glue them to the substrate. The goal became expanded to include the creation of multiple individual pieces by each student.

Upon completion, an exposition of their work was held at the Atelier, where the students played an important part in helping to set up, along with their teachers and the Atelier staff. The emotional opening night of *Pieces and Fragments, Laughs and Growth* was attended by parents, family members, friends, and school staff. As the press and television cameras looked on, the Atelier del Mosaico de Puerto Rico graduated them as mosaic artists.

A Beautiful Collaboration

The students’ success had clearly demonstrated the benefits of employing mosaics as occupational therapy, and they were hungry for more. Having won the hearts of the Atelier’s staff, the next project was quickly organized. A collective art piece was eagerly started—a mural to beautify the school lobby. Ideas and plans flowed out of a second interview process, and after approximately three years, the efforts of this beautiful collaboration are evident, proving how far this group has come.

Together, the students learned about color, composition, contrast, light, and shadow. They also learned to work toward a common goal, respect each other, and enjoy the process. These special young artists have given of themselves with no conditions—and they have been successful!

Rivera sums up the collaboration: “Every day, every student of Room 108 has taught us great life lessons. They have expressed themselves, through genuine hearts, with devotion, willingness, friendship, a fighting spirit, perseverance, empathy, and love—in short, as family. The Atelier del Mosaico de Puerto Rico has witnessed an historic moment in our own lives as well as the lives of the students and school staff. The entire experience is a testament to what happens when artists expose themselves and others to the world of art. The school will never be the same.” **GA**

Visit americanmosaics.org to learn more about the Society of American Mosaic Artists, its upcoming events, and how to become a member.



Students of Room 108 gather around their 8' x 8' mosaic achievement, *Reflections from Our Heart*, mosaic relief on wood created with foam, glass, tesserae, tiles, plates, rocks, and millefiori. The details of the entire mural express the particular interests of each participant, with an emphasis on fun, music, the arts, and smiling. Project coordinator from the Atelier, Helga Maribel Sanchez, is 5th from the left.