**Art from Within**

by Gentry Porter, Fall 2025 Creative Placemaking Intern from Marshall University's HerdWork program

Gina Milum, Community Outreach Coordinator and Gallery Manager at West Edge Factory, still remembers when inspiration struck during a trip to Parkersburg, West Virginia. She wandered into a vibrant studio called Art Beat, an art space open daily for adults with disabilities to create and even sell their work. Gina quickly phoned a local contact to ask if anything like Art Beat existed in Huntington; it didn't. That was all she needed to know. "We'll see what we can do," Gina resolved, determined to create such an opportunity back home. Upon returning to West Edge, she eagerly approached artist and educator Barb Lavalley Benton with the idea.

That conversation would eventually help shape Art from Within, a studio art program for adults with disabilities housed at West Edge Factory in Huntington's Westmoreland neighborhood. West Edge Factory is a once-abandoned clothing factory that Coalfield Development purchased and revitalized as a hub for social enterprise, job training, and community events. Within Coalfield's broader mission to rebuild the Appalachian economy by transforming disinvested places into community assets, Creative Placemaking is the arm that weaves together local art, history, and culture to bring those spaces to life. Art from Within is one of Creative Placemaking's flagship programs: Barb is the contracted artist and teacher who leads the workshops, while Gina and Sassa Wilkes, the Creative Placemaking Director, support the program as part of Coalfield's wider team of staff and grant writers.

As it turned out, Barb had long imagined a program like this. A teacher for special-needs students in the public school system, she once told Gina her "dream was to actually start a program where those kinds of artists would have space." After her eye-opening visit to Art Beat, Gina came back to Huntington "on fire" with excitement. She told Barb, "Okay, I get it now," and that was all the encouragement Barb needed. Accordingly, Barb sketched out a simple art curriculum, while Gina secured the workspace and supplies at West Edge Factory. Within a few months, Art from Within was up and running with a pilot class of about half a dozen adult artists.

That first year's group quickly blossomed; by the second year, it grew to nine participants, and by the third year, nearly twenty were involved. Remarkably, none of the original members have dropped out; everyone kept coming back, eager to create more. Word spread quickly, bringing a surge of new inquiries, but with Barb as the sole instructor, capacity was limited. "There's just a huge need for it… [but] there's only one Barb," Gina quips, joking that they'd need "three or four of her" to serve everyone interested.

From her years in the school system, Barb knew people often underestimated these artists' capabilities. "People have misconceptions that they can't do certain things," she observes, noting how society tends to limit individuals with disabilities. Art from Within operates on a different belief: given the chance, the artists can create work that reflects their inner lives. "They have things inside of them that come out when you just give them the opportunity," Barb explains. She avoids a cookie-cutter approach. "I'll give a project, but everybody's looks completely different," she says, delighted at how each person's individuality shines through. Barb introduces her students to a wide range of media, e.g., acrylics, pastels, clay, watercolor, and more, to help each find their favorite outlet. The results are never uniform; one artist might

sculpt whimsical flowers while another adds dramatic horns to a piece, and no two artworks are alike.

One student, Ricky, illustrated this point. He had never worked with clay before, but when Barb told him to make whatever he wanted, he sculpted a clay face of someone he loves. “It doesn’t matter that it doesn’t really look like that person,” Barb says; what mattered is that he learned enough to create something deeply personal on his own. Another artist, Hannah, carefully shaped a small clay figurine of her favorite character, Stitch, using techniques like slip-and-score she’d learned. When her piece survived the kiln firing intact, “that made me really happy inside,” Barb recalls with a proud smile.

Barb also works one-on-one with those who need extra help. Pam, for example, has use of only one hand and cannot speak, yet she clearly envisions her art— “she’s got in her mind what she wants… and she’s a perfectionist,” Barb says. During one session, Barb held a piece of clay steady while Pam sculpted a beautiful dove. The experience moved Barb to her core. “I want to just yell at people who think they can’t do anything,” she says of that moment. “Look at what this person’s doing! …They have the same wants and the same desires that we do.” Seeing Pam’s triumph proved that with patience and respect, these artists can achieve anything.

Art from Within’s impact extends beyond the artwork; it is building a community of friendship and inclusion. “I get to do art, and I get to see my friends,” was the overwhelming report when Gina asked participants what they value most about the class. After aging out of school, many adults with disabilities face isolation, but this class has become a lively social lifeline. Over three years, Gina has watched friendships blossom among the artists, and their joy is contagious: “When those guys are here, I’m happy,” she says simply.

Gina herself has formed genuine bonds. One participant, Beth, even shares her birthday (a coincidence that sparked a special friendship). “As soon as I see her, my face lights up,” Gina says, noting that it inspired her to see this group “in a totally different light.” Exposure to Art from Within expanded Gina’s own perspective, and she hopes it can do the same for the wider community. People with disabilities “…want the same things that anyone else wants—they want connection, they want community, they want to create,” she reminds those who have never been exposed to this community.

On my visits to the program, I’ve watched them gather around to share their works-in-progress; “Here’s my piece,” one will say, encouraging each other just like any group of artists. They identify themselves by what I can do, what I can create, who I am, not by any disability label. It’s a profoundly touching sight that exemplifies the dignity and belonging Art from Within nurtures every week.

The broader Huntington community is beginning to take notice as well. The program’s annual public exhibition of student artwork has become a highlight at West Edge— “always the best-attended exhibit we have,” Gina notes. At last year’s show, Barb’s students beamed with pride, wearing “I’m an artist” badges as visitors marveled at their work. “They want to buy my art!” one participant exclaimed, thrilled that her creations were in demand. Barb often shows photos of her students “pushing that clay with their own hands” to prove they truly are the ones making the art. When neighbors see these artists in action, lingering stereotypes fall away. Community support starts with simply showing up: attending events, spreading the word, and recognizing the artists as full members of the creative community.

In just a few years, Art from Within has gained incredible momentum. “It’s just organically grown, like it had a life of its own,” Barb says, amazed at how their little idea took

off. Even when a grant fell through one semester, she refused to let the program lapse; “I’m not going to not do it,” Barb resolved, continuing classes without pay until new funding came through. Her determination paid off; not a single student left during that rough patch, and eventually, the support arrived to keep going. “Nobody drops out,” Barb notes. What began as a “little dream” is now regularly scheduled meetings to produce fine art, expanding from six to twenty participants over three years.

Today, that momentum is held by more than just two passionate individuals. As of January 2025, Creative Placemaking is an official program of Coalfield Development, and Art from Within operates within that intentional framework. Coalfield’s mission-driven structure supports the class with a wider network of staff, grant writers, and partners who help ensure its long-term stability.

Within that framework, the Creative Placemaking team is looking ahead. They imagine a studio modeled after Art Beat, open five days a week, with staff on hand so artists could drop in to create and even sell their work, helping them earn income while supporting the program with less reliance on grant funding. That future vision includes room for more artists, more classes, and more chances for participants to show and sell their work as part of the broader creative ecosystem at West Edge Factory. Achieving that will require continued public support and, of course, exposure.

For now, Barb and the Creative Placemaking team are proud of how far Art from Within has come. Ask Barb to summarize the program, and she answers with one word: “Freedom.” It’s the freedom to create, to express, to be seen as an artist without limits. “Creative freedom and flow,” she elaborates—the kind of artistic liberation any creator would cherish. Looking ahead to 2026, Coalfield Development and the Creative Placemaking program are actively fundraising to

ensure that this freedom endures and that Art from Within can continue offering high-quality arts experiences to adults with disabilities. Thanks to that ethos, a once-overlooked group in Huntington now has a vibrant space to paint, sculpt, and thrive. Art from Within enables creative expression that was always there, which is a testament to the beauty that emerges when artists are given the chance to flourish from within. Currently, a funding campaign is active for this program, and donations can be provided at West Edge Factory's website: https://westedgefactory.com/artfromwithin/