



Artist Benny Andrews makes a point when addressing University City High School art students. (Post-Dispatch Photo by Karen Elshout)

# He Helps Prisoners Paint

By Patricia Rice  
Of the Post-Dispatch Staff

Benny Andrews is a big name-dropper. He wants to open doors.

Now he is not your average namedropper. He never once during the interview mentioned the Metropolitan Museum of Art, nor the Museum of Modern Art — even though they own paintings by him.

The doors he is trying to open are on prisons. Benny Andrews is trying to get into prisons all over the country.

San Quentin is his big name drop. He says he has been there, and supervisors in smaller prisons perk up. Never mind what kind of an artist he is. If he has made it at San Quentin he is good enough for them.

He is not interested in taking up residence in prison.

Since 1971 he has been co-ordinating art programs taught by artists — not social workers or craft teachers — at prisons. Now the group, the Black Emergency Cultural Coalition, has programs in 25 prisons in 17 states. The programs are financed with church and private funds, two grants from the National Endowment for the Arts and by lots of free art supplies from suppliers. Artists whose paintings, unlike Andrews's paintings pull in less than four figures cash a piece, get paid for teaching.

The group is not out to teach every prisoner to be so good he'll aspire to display his works next to Andrews's in the Metropolitan.

"Basically, we give them a form of expression, we broaden their horizons. Once they start to look at art, really look at it, they see a lot of things differently. Art can be the catalyst."

"We try to develop an appreciation of art," he said. That appreciation has made some prisoners want to look at things they never thought about before — dance, poetry, drama, he said.

One of the most touching uses of art created in the prison painting and drawing classes is as a simple gift, and a form of communication to family and friends on the outside.

One special merit of an art class is that the prisoners can take their work back to their cells and work.

"None of us have time on the outside, but these guys have all the time in the world..."

The group was formed after the riot broke out at Attica Prison in New York in 1971. The problems were so immense that there did not seem any way a group of black artists could help.

"We said OK, at least we can offer painting, share what we have," he said. "There was nothing to do in the Tombs, a New York City detention prison. It was overcrowded and the inmates were paranoid."

On Nov. 10, 1971 he began his class. It was a hit. With all the prison talk in the air many art suppliers were willing to donate. Some artists and churchgoers dug into their pockets for the cause.

"Word spread quickly. We had an exhibit and one of the inmates became almost an overnight sensation. His pictures were in the papers. All the other inmates got fired up. They were painting all night. They wanted to be as famous. They painted on bedsheets. When they could not get oil to mix their paints with, they used alcohol, a mess but they didn't know any better. They just wanted to become overnight sensations."

The art gave the inmates something to talk about, he said. They had something to write home about. They got magazines and looked for subjects to paint.

(OVER)



The reality of their own ability eventually broke but it did not hurt their dreaming, he said. Only 1 per cent of prison art students really want to be artists. For art teachers in prison they are the most difficult to handle.

Other painters gave other art programs in other prisons. Churches and then New York state and national grants aided. Andrews has worked hard to see that programs can go on if grant money is lost. Artists can find ways to get churches or civic groups or art wholesalers to contribute. He hopes prisons having the programs will co-operate to keep them going.

The closest institutions where the black cultural coalition program coordinates art classes are at Fort Leavenworth, Kansas, and in Cook County in Illinois.

While he was in St. Louis he visited Dismas House to talk to former convicts and Group Home 19 for juveniles as well as the American Art Congress. His visit was sponsored by the Community of Women Artists, at 1159 South Kingshighway. The group could work with women in the local jails, or at the State Correctional Center for Women at Tip-ton, Mo., he told them.

"Women in prison have a much lower self-esteem than men," he said, "Men have made a profession out of prison. A lot of men we know and respect have gone to prison. I don't know of any woman, including Clifford Irving's wife, who has gone into a woman's prison and been respected.

"It's harder for women in prison. There are fewer role models for women prisoners to follow. Visually a lot of women in prison look like Mary Worth (the comic strip auntie character). It is just that at one time in their life in a moment of rage they broke, and killed a husband or a lover. So, these women who look like apple pie are in prison. They don't need men artists to teach them, to tell them what to do. Men are usually the reason they are in prison, whether they are in there for murdering men or for prostitution. Even armed robbers and pickpockets are often working for men or they are mothers abandoned by men. Men almost always had something to do with them being in prison."

"Even the women supervisors are so used to taking orders from men that they can't see women artists teaching," he said. "But, the organization made every effort to send women artists to women prisons."

Andrews devotes many hours each week organizing the project. He not only does it to help the prisons, there is a small feedback for himself.

"An artist has to stay in contact with what you are. A lot of artists go into being sophisticated, they change and forget who they are—their imagery. They don't realize how far away their mind has drifted."

Andrews was never a prisoner. But, like many in prison, he was poor and he is black. He is so fair and his blue eyes are so bright that when he was organizing the Black Emergency Cultural Coalition he asked darker-skinned blacks to talk on television.

Benny Andrews was born in 1930 in Madison, Ga. His fair complexion he inherited from his white plantation-owner grandfather. He also inherited his grandmother's poverty.

Because his grandfather was white and Benny was black, he called him Mr. Orr, not Grandpa. Andrews's father worked on nearby farms and in saw-mills. His mother picked cotton. In the one-room, log cabin black school he drew cowboys and Santa Claus in the margin of his work.

His dad loved to paint airplanes on barns. Art was fun for Benny Andrews. He only went to Burney Street High School, the black school in Madison, when it was too cold to work in the cotton fields. He was the second of 10 children. But, when there were drawings needed for biology, geometry and home economics, the teachers asked Benny to prepare them. He joined the 4-H Club and did many drawing projects. He won a 4-H scholarship to Fort Valley State College, Fort Valley, Ga., a black college. He took the art appreciation course, the only art class offered, six times. He did poorly in other courses, lost his scholarship and joined the Air Force. Four years later at the end of the Korean War he was discharged as a staff sergeant. He entered the School of the Art Institute of Chicago under the GI Bill.

"I remember in Chicago people said I should wear a hat (to cover his tight curly hair) and pass for white," he said. "There was no way I would do that."

Four years later he graduated with a B.F.A. and, with his wife, Mary Ellen Smith, moved to New York. They had rough times. He painted in their lower East Side apartment and watched their baby, Christopher, while his wife went to work. The next year he made his first real art money, \$400 at an outdoor fair at Washington Square. His work was also displayed at the Philadelphia Academy Bi-Annual Exhibition and at the Detroit Institute Thirteenth Biennial of Painting and Sculpture. The next year, 1960, he had his first one-man show at the Paul Kessler Gallery in Provincetown, Mass. He sold few paintings but the next year the same gallery gave him a second show and his paintings began to sell.

He had several successful New York shows and received a John Hay Whitney Fellowship. He also started teaching drawing and painting at the New School for Social Research in New York.

In 1966 he had a one-man show at an Atlanta gallery. He received a lot of attention and many people came. Not one painting sold in his home state and the gallery closed at the end of the show.

He became a leader of the black artist protest and was active in the Harlem Cultural Council when it withdrew support for the Metropolitan Museum's show, "Harlem On My Mind." He and others demonstrated at the Whitney Museum of American Art when it did not include blacks in its "Artists of the Thirties" shows. Later, the Black Emergency Cultural Coalition was funded at his studio to protest against the "Harlem on My Mind" show at the Met. One of the white artists supporting the coalition was Alice Neel. She painted a portrait of Andrews, which is widely acclaimed.

As black artists were invited to talk with museum directors and exhibition curators about the exclusion of the works of black artists, Andrews was often the spokesman. His work with prisons also came out of those early protests.

In the last five years he has had several big exhibitions each year. His works have been purchased by major museums. Colleges and universities have asked him to lecture. He is art critic of *Encore* magazine, a black arts periodical. Last year he was visiting critic at Yale University.

When he recently went back to Madison, what he calls the most beautiful town in Georgia, the white druggist reminded him that his grandfather was white and, therefore, Benny Andrews was "one of them." Andrews grinned and shook his head — a big happy but ironic grin.