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## Art, Angels and Homes Hand in hand in the valley

By Maria Morrison Heningburg

The mantra of ValleyArts is “Art as an engine, art as an engine”. It calls to mind the chorus of the 1930s, children’s classic, *The Little Engine That Could*: “I think I can, I think I can.” “Art as an engine” is clearly just as powerful; when you visit ValleyArts, you definitely think they can!

Nearly two decades ago South Orange resident Pat Morrissy founded Housing and Neighborhood Services, Inc., better known as HANDS Inc. The group has demonstrated their commitment to Orange and East Orange one house at a time by targeting the worst house on a street, rehabilitating the structure then finding and training new owners who must be first time home buyers. By working closely with community groups, local residents and civic leaders, the scope of HANDS’ programs have grown. It is now far-reaching and well respected. Their inclusive grassroots approach enabled the organization to embrace the entire Valley neighborhood.



Catherine Lazen in front of Arts Unbound.



Rendering of the Hat Factory.

The Valley neighborhood is west of Scotland Road, bordering South Orange to the south, straddling Orange and West Orange borders in the shadow of First Mountain. An expanse of some 40 blocks, it is edgy and urban, reminiscent of Hoboken and Brooklyn thirty years ago. The landscape is a mix of gritty industrial buildings, small businesses, houses and churches. In the distant past the Valley was the preeminent center for hat manufacturing. Today the biggest draw is the area’s legendary Italian restaurants.

HANDS worked closely with people in the community to develop the Valley Neighborhood Preservation Plan. With the apparent need for an arts initiative, ValleyArts was born. Throughout the country “the Arts have proven to be an effective

engine for neighborhood revitalization, economic development, job creation, increased business traffic, career enhancement and educational improvement.” HANDS will work with ValleyArts to “assist, guide and nurture the creation of the organization”. Like any good parent, however, HANDS’ eventual goal is to give ValleyArts wings, so the coalition can thrive and prosper on its own.

HANDS acquired the pivotal and historic F. Berg Hat Factory, located in the heart of the valley at Nassau

and Jefferson streets. Construction on the Valley Renaissance Center is poised to begin, set to transform the neglected industrial buildings into mixed use: loft, artist studio, commercial and community space.



Inside Arts Unbound.

Artists have traditionally been drawn to fringe neighborhoods; just think of Lautrec in Montmartre. Artists have found the Valley. Sparks of creative energy are evident in the community and excitement permeates the air. The key is in the engine: art.

A few blocks away as you exit the Highland Avenue train station and head down into the Valley, you'll find the recently renovated Brass Company building, a HANDS creation and ValleyArts baby. The 544 Freeman Street storefront is the new home of Arts Unbound; the organization's first permanent space. Arts Unbound is the first "artist" tenant, an anchor for the up and coming arts destination.

Selecting Arts Unbound as the first tenant was a brilliant choice, the pairing serendipitous. Everything about Arts Unbound is cool: the program, its mission, their new space and their founder and Executive Director, Catherine Lazen. "Ethereal and angelic" are good words to describe Lazen. Inspired by a series of events and experiences in her life, the South Orange resident created Arts Unbound a few years back. A non-profit organization, with a traveling art program that is investing in untapped human potential; Arts Unbound's "sole mission is to provide artistic and vocational opportunities in the visual arts to adults living with developmental, physical and mental disabilities."

To Lazen, the new space "represents the ticket to longevity-the headquarters and the permanence are key to continuing the mission." It is part gallery, part studio, part salon, part retail space. As a whole, this multipurpose space inspires and celebrates life -- and hope. According to Lazen, "Hope turns into changed lives and translates to social change. This space, this program, this community -this is social change in action". She wants people to "see the potential of the disenfranchised, [because it] equals hope for all."

The new neighbor slated to join Arts Unbound at the Brass Company is Blackberries II. Owned by Leslie Williams, Blackberries II imports arts and artifacts from Africa. Just around the corner another artist has already settled into his new studio. Acclaimed designer Peter Mann relocated from the old Lorillard building in Jersey City. Mann custom designs and fabricates furniture and objects, specializing in high-end metal work. He's been called a "thing maker" and his client list includes such fashionable companies as Prada.

The ValleyArts' goal to help the Valley evolve into an arts' destination is well under way. In order to

avoid missteps that have occurred in other communities, artists have been included in the process. “Art without borders” is what ValleyArts is: bridging the Orange towns together, through art. Art is the engine that drives positive change. The engine has clearly been started.

Detailed information about ValleyArts and HANDS Inc. can be found at the web site:  
[www.handsinc.org](http://www.handsinc.org).

*Maria Morrison Henningburg's grandma worked at the Lorillard factory long before she was born. Her favorite Auntie Ro was a foreman at a hat factory on Astor Place in New York for decades and going to the hat factory was a favorite childhood Saturday excursion.*



#### T-SHIRTS WANTED:

Much of what is created at Arts Unbound is intentionally made from recycled materials. If you have materials to donate for artistic endeavors please do so. You never know, mere flip-flops have been reborn as fanciful religious totems. Colorful cotton tee shirts are currently sought; you know the type, the ones you can't donate, hand down or sell due to incorrigible stains. Brilliant, treasured weavings emerge from the tees, a real rags to riches tale. Art Unbound info can be found at [www.artsunbound.org](http://www.artsunbound.org).