

## Art Educator Receives Award from the White House by Kristin Kemp



Introducing her student to First Lady Michelle Obama at the White House was a career highlight for Susan Jenson (MA '98, art history). Jenson is the executive director of the Downtown Aurora Visual Arts (DAVA), where she's worked as an arts educator since getting her master's degree in art history from DU's School of Art and Art History in 1998.

Under Jenson's leadership, DAVA's after-school arts program serves more than 1,000 Aurora, CO, children annually. DAVA's Job Training in the Arts program received the National Arts and Humanities Youth Program Award (NAHYP) in 2014. According to the White House, "each year NAHYP recognizes 12 of the country's best creative youth development programs for using engagement in the arts and humanities to increase academic achievement, graduation rates and college enrollment."

"Education does not stop when the school day ends—and the arts reignite interest in learning and experimentation," said Jenson. "Winning the national award was the ultimate validation that what we are doing at DAVA works. Arts education expands kids' reach to careers they might never have considered by providing a gateway to any career that requires adaptability, attention to detail, self-efficacy, communication skills, etc."

DAVA received the NAHYP award in recognition for its work to advance the development of young people through the arts. For instance, an independent study determined that middle school students in DAVA's youth job training program had substantially better GPAs at school, and a National Research Center evaluation showed that 89% of the students "felt more prepared to work at a job." Increasingly, the arts are being recognized for the impact they have in building vibrant, healthy communities—growing a creative workforce in Aurora is part of DAVA's long term plan.

"I am surrounded by an incredibly diverse population of young people who generally have no arts background or art-related ambition. But they love to experiment, collaborate and develop art skills to find new ways of looking at the world," said Jenson. "In addition, we are providing students with the tools to navigate the demands of a changing economy. By pushing them toward artistic excellence, we are at the same time asking them to excel as individuals and community members."

Taking a trip to Washington DC to meet the First Lady was a particularly special opportunity for Boris Cochajil, one of Jenson's students. "The First Lady was incredibly gracious, smart and kind. She really focused her attention on Boris, and he was thrilled to represent his fellow students at DAVA," said Jenson.

Jenson, who has a BA in art history from New College, attended graduate school at DU as an adult where she studied American and European Surrealism under Professor M.E. Warlick. Upon graduation she intended to teach at the collegiate level. But after teaching youth classes at DAVA she discovered her true calling: guiding young people through creative expression.

Jenson credits her demanding thesis experience in graduate school with preparing her for a career as an arts education administrator. “I didn’t know it at the time, but my thesis research and writing training proved instrumental to me as an arts administrator. I got promoted quickly at DAVA and became responsible for grant writing, which required a lot of research and writing. Within four years I became executive director.”

Jenson’s students learn how to problem-solve and work collaboratively through themed art projects that she and her staff develop, such as a recent wearable robotic project that involved studying anatomy, computer programming, design and culture. “Many of our students don’t necessarily aspire to become artists, though some do. Rather, they move ahead in business, technology, health sciences – you name it. But they approach their education and careers with a new found flexibility and creativity that I believe stems from an arts education,” said Jenson.

DAVA’s ‘community arts’ curriculum focuses on infusing local culture into the art projects. Jenson says, “Our emphasis on sharing cultural identity has made for a unique atmosphere where kids learn from each other. It’s quite remarkable.” Located in Northern Aurora, DAVA serves a diverse population, including international families from Africa and the Middle East. As students created films this summer, they pondered questions like, “what are the questions most people want answered about Muslim culture?” or, “what does transformation mean in my life?”

Plus, research shows that DAVA students have higher GPAs and graduation rates. Jenson’s goal is to increase college matriculation rates, too. In fact, several DAVA students have enrolled at DU. This past summer Jenson hired Adrian Nava, a former DAVA student who is now a junior at DU, as an intern. While a student at DAVA, Nava created his first award winning film and learned he had a responsibility not just to himself but to his team of peers. “DAVA was the marker for my journey as an activist and scholar,” said Nava.

“Many of our interns take away a whole new view of working with an international population of kids. They get experience seeing how one-on-one interaction can literally change a child’s life and attitude,” said Jenson. We hope in the future to be known as a training ground for students seeking experience in community arts.”

“First Lady Obama told me: ‘You teach kids more than just skills in the arts and humanities. You light a fire in them; you help them grow socially and emotionally, and that has an impact on our kids—not just on their success in the arts and in the humanities, but on their success in school and in life.’”

Accolades from the White House won't stop Jenson from aspiring for more, though. She strives to expand DAVA's operation to serve even more families in Aurora: she is now leading a major 4,000 square-foot 1.9 million reconstruction project to erect collaborative art studio spaces that will pair DAVA's modern curriculum with a modern building. Learn more about [DAVA](#).

*[PHOTO: Job Training student Boris Cochajil and Executive Director Susan Jenson accept a 2014 National Arts and Humanities Youth Program Award from First Lady Michelle Obama.]*