

Water Street Glassworks: Otis and Lynne
Long Haul Productions // MCACA Creating Connection project

INTRO: Creating Connection is a first-person series on the personal and community impacts of arts programs in Michigan. And there are few places that have had as much impact on a community as Water Street Glassworks in Benton Harbor. This week we hear from a glass arts student, and his mentor, Glassworks' director.

OTIS: My name's Otis Cornelius. The first time I came in here was breathtaking. It had a really good old feel to it.

AMBIENCE

OTIS: I started at Fired Up about five years ago. I think I was in the ninth grade, about fifteen or sixteen. I found out about the program through my older sister. She had come to work on some glass art. She was able to, like, sell it and get money from it. So I thought it was a cool idea.

AMBIENCE

LYNNE: My name is Lynn Clayton and I am the executive director at Water Street Glassworks. I am a Benton Harbor girl, graduate of Benton Harbor High School. Benton Harbor is 98% black. So when I started working here it was really amazing to me because I watched primarily students from the inner city, come into the studios not knowing anything about glass, being asked to work in front of a torch that's almost 3000 degrees, to listen to directions, to have self-discipline, to work as a team and just see them transformed.

AMBIENCE

LYNNE: When Otis walked in he was not very committed.

OTIS: I was childish, immature ...

LYNNE: He was pretty flighty. Could get away with a lot of things, maybe?

OTIS: I wanted to do glassblowing because I knew that was the coolest thing. I'm playing with fire and I'm playing with hot glass, but then when I found out how nice stained glass was and how closer it was to what I liked to do ... you know, that's when I started to realize that stained glass is for me.

AMBIENCE

OTIS: When I was younger I loved to draw, but stained glass coming into my life made me, like, express my artistic side so much more. Because I would've just been drawing and then stopped in probably, like, seventh, eighth grade. But because I was in the art program, it made me want to be a better artist.

AMBIENCE

OTIS: My teacher name was Mary Jane. She showed me that people care for kids that aren't their own. She was a Caucasian woman and I'm African-American. She had no relation to me but she cared so much. She was just a really big part of my life.

AMBIENCE

OTIS: I learned how to make really nice suncatchers, made lamps, chandeliers, butterflies, small flowers ...

AMBIENCE

OTIS: I liked to make image derived from poems. My favorite poem is Edgar Allan Poe, The Raven. So I stain-glassed the Raven. I would probably say it was my favorite piece, 'cause I don't think I put as much passion into anything else as I did the Raven. Miss Lynne has one

LYNNE: It's really special to me, one of my favorites. I have it in my house. I just looked at it this morning. It's a beautiful piece.

OTIS: I remember the feeling. It was really uplifting, 'cause I never would've known somebody would want something that I created. It made me feel good. Like really, really good.

LYNNE: When I took over as education director Otis said, "You know, it would be really great if other people could come and not just students from Benton Harbor," because a lot of kids from Benton Harbor don't ever interact with kids from surrounding communities. So he participated with our board retreat to open up the program to students from rural communities like Dowagiac and Eau Claire.

OTIS: That way, other people have a good opportunity to see what we get to create, and see what other people get to create. I met younger people who did metalwork. I met people that was from K-Zoo and they made lawn ornaments.

LYNNE: I watched him over the course of several years just become this very mature young man ...

OTIS Growing up, like, people don't really talk about homosexuality, and some people down them. They make them feel like they're inhuman or they shouldn't be a part of society. But I found out just from being in the art community not to judge people just from one's ethnicity or one's sexuality. It showed me to embrace things more.

LYNNE: We're a pretty impoverished community. We're not going to get more manufacturing jobs in Benton Harbor. So if we can teach kids how to run a business, how to work with the public, even if they go to Qdoba, or Target, or work at Whirlpool, they're using those skills that they've gained through Fired Up.

AMBIENCE

OTIS: We are grinding glass. Get all the sharp parts off first, 'cause you don't want to stab yourself.

AMBIENCE

OTIS: If I'd never been in the Fired Up program? Whew! It gave me a purpose. It taught me to be a better person. At the moment I'm an assistant manager at a Mexican grill. Being at Fired Up it showed me there's alternatives. It taught me leadership, that if I take the initiative and I applied myself that I can get those opportunities that's out there.

LYNNE: Otis is a perfect example of why it's so important for Water Street Glassworks to be here. When I was growing up we were very proud of being from Benton Harbor. And it takes a lot of energy, a lot of effort to bring a city back. And so to be able to see these kids ... I mean, their glassmaking, is as good as many glass artists that I've seen that do this for a living. And so the community responds to that. They see how talented these kids are, and they see how capable they are if they're just given that opportunity. It really does a lot to help heal the spirit of this city.

MUSIC

BACK ANNOUNCE: Otis and Lynne's story was produced by Dan Collison and Elizabeth Meister of Long Haul Productions, as part of the Michigan Council for Arts and Cultural Affairs "Creating Connection" project. Thanks to everyone at Water Street Glassworks for their help.