

The Art in a Box Program exports self-esteem to positive kids globally.

“WANT TO TELL YOU ABOUT THE MAN WHO PUT ME in the sack,” said a Cambodian boy. Pointing to one figure in his painting, then to the other, the child told his teacher about the man who’d kidnapped him when he was 3—and about the man who’d rescued him and returned him to his village. Child trafficking is routine in Cambodia, and young people know they they may be kidnapped at any time. A great number have lost one or both parents to AIDS; many are themselves HIV positive. Yet when they come to Valentina DuBasky’s art class, they are all smiles and determination.

Having worked with humanitarian projects throughout Cambodia in the 1990’s, DuBasky founded Art in a Box in 2005. Named for the bright boxes holding the art supplies, the program (artinabox.org) now reaches five countries. In Cambodia, it targets the slums of the capital, Phnom Penh. It also gives classes in a hospice for children with AIDS, some of whom can’t leave their beds. “It’s about testimony through art,” DuBasky says. The approach is suited to Cambodia’s low literacy rate and rich visual culture.

One girl DuBasky interviewed, age 10, lost both parents to AIDS. She can’t remember their faces but says that her father was a construction worker and that her mother sold bananas on the street. Another girl said that she wished Cambodian children could work less and go to school more. But she was also eager to talk about her black cat, which she’d named Prosperity.

—KATHLEEN REEVES



1. Art in a Box founder Valentina DuBasky (left) joins art gallery director Cheryl Pelavin for an Art in a Box benefit in New York City.

2. In a slum of Cambodia’s capital city, Phnom Penh, Art in a Box helps lead a class for kids living with or affected by AIDS.

3. Even though Cambodia has a low literacy rate, the culture has a rich appreciation of visual art.

4. One child’s depiction of his daily life on the streets, collecting garbage.

5. A student digs into some ice cream and cake at an exhibition of the children’s work at the Phnom Penh Red Cross Center.

6. The program’s teachers asked children to explore their identities by drawing and painting portraits of themselves and each other.

7. Pupils explore and express their idea of community and sense of home and place.

8. For an Art in a Box graduate, this self-portrait is a profile in courage.