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BW 8 Teen getting the hang of an artful job

When you stare at a beautiful painting in a museum, you probably don't wonder what's holding it securely to the wall; you probably don't even notice the wall behind it.

But Kimberly Vaquedano does.

The Co-op City teen took a course in art handling, a niche profession but a burgeoning field in a city where there are scores of museums and hundreds of art galleries and auction houses.

Art handlers are the people who safely transport and store artwork and artifacts. They wrap, pack, crate, ship, install and dismantle exhibits and maintain permanent collections of framed and unframed art at institutions such as the Metropolitan Museum of Art, Sotheby's, the Brooklyn Museum.

"I didn't know there were people with whole careers in this," said Vaquedano. "There is a whole way of packing it, hanging it, all these different instructions, tedious little things."

It's an unusual career, especially for kids from the Bronx. But it's in this borough where the only art handler training program in the nation is offered, by the Bronx Council on the Arts.

Vaquedano interned at the Longwood Gallery at Hostos Community College after



taking the course, and now she works there full-time.

She took the training through Handle It!, a program developed a year ago by the Riverdale Mental Health Association and funded by NYCWorks, a joint initiative of the New York City Council and United Way of New York City.

The program provides career preparation and training as art handlers and gallery assistants for kids 17-21 without high school diplomas or jobs.

Graduates of the three-month course are placed in internships with museums and galleries and receive job placement services. Participants learn skills in work readiness, business communications and customer service, and receive support services such as counseling and GED preparation assistance.

The Riverdale Mental Health Association, which provides mental health and support services to children and adults in the Bronx, was looking to develop a program for young adults to teach them "hard skills," but wanted

something "interesting and unique," said Rita Leigner, director of Handle It!

"The Bronx Council on the Arts provides the hard skills, and we give support," said Leigner. "They learn to hang objects on walls, from ceilings.

"We brought them on field trips to museums, galleries, such as the Newberger Museum of Art in Purchase, the Brooklyn Museum, the Bronx Museum of the Arts, the Bronx River Arts Center."

Most of the kids who apply are artists or have an intense interest in art.

Leigner said 40 youths participated in the program in its first two sessions.

About eight got permanent jobs.

The program was funded for a year, and this month the group hopes to hear that the funding will be extended for another year. If so, another Handle It! group will start training in April, Leigner said.

Vaquedano, 18, had dropped out of school to work, then quit her job and was not really doing anything with her life. She wanted to get her equivalency diploma, and a friend told her about the program.

"As soon as she said 'art,' I was interested and motivated," Vaquedano said. "I used to paint in high school and I was getting into photography."

She enjoyed the field trips every other week, and took classes on how to manage money, work etiquette, and the art handling.

"I learned a lot. . . . We went behind the scenes at the museums and spoke to people," she said. "They showed different hardware to hang the art; I thought they just used a nail and a hook.

"But they use techniques so they don't damage the art, to hold it securely, they showed us how to hang art on bricks and concrete, what different types of walls to use, not just sheetrock or plaster."

She was assigned an internship at Longwood Gallery for a month, beginning as a receptionist, but enjoyed working on grant applications for the artists, one of the financial facets of the art world.

"The boss hired me full-time," she said proudly, referring to William Aguado, executive director of Bronx Council on the Arts Development Corp.

She plunged into working, and now she is focusing on taking her GED test.

She said she may be putting her photography skills to work helping one of the artists who needs pictures taken for one of his projects.

"I've been here for about seven months, and I've met so many artists I never would have gotten to interact with," she said.

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