

Hop on the Culture Trolley

A fun, free tour
of the best of
the Bronx

BY TIZIANA RINALDI

What is red and yellow, sports a charming vintage look, takes people all around and invites everyone to hop on at the sound of a bell?

It's the Bronx Culture Trolley! Created by the Bronx Culture on the Arts (BCA) in 2002 to encourage art exploration and business development in the South Bronx, its popularity has skyrocketed over the years — along with its ridership — and the number of venues it showcases.

"It's fun, free and enlightening," said George Acevedo, board member of the Bronx Culture on the Arts, who says he's proud of how his organization has shown "the rest of the country how to do a cultural trolley!"

Since its first run with 55 people and four venues, the streetcar — a replica of an early 20th century trolley — has shuttled over 4,500 people up and down the "South Bronx Cultural Corridor,"

the hub of artistic, entertainment and dining opportunities that BCA helped establish in the Lower Grand Concourse area.

The free family-friendly project has exposed Bronxites and tourists to art exhibits, poetry readings, plays, music, comedy, screenings and dance performances at more than locations.

Each first Wednesday of the month (except in September and January) visitors gather at Longwood Gallery, at Hostos Community College, located at 450 Grand Concourse and 149th Street, at 5:00 pm, where they are welcomed by BCA's staff and treated to light food and wine. The trolley leaves promptly at 5:30 pm right outside the gallery for a tour of Mott Haven's district; then loops

around until about 8:30.

Riders are free to get off at any of the stops. They can decide how long to stay at each venue, how many places to visit and when to hop back on the trolley to finish the round or return to Longwood. Activities change every month and have included cultural and entertaining destinations such as the Bronx Museum of the Arts, Pregones Theater, Alexander Avenue art studios and antiques shops, the Bruckner Gallery at the Bruckner Bar and Grill, the Bronx Blue Bedroom Project, Sweetwater's, the Tree Museum and the Yankee Tavern.

On Wednesday June 2, BCA will host a special award celebration with the distribution of the 2010 BRIO (Bronx Recognizes Its Own) grants, at Longwood Gallery. There, a group of local artists will receive financial support for their work in the literary, media, performing and visual arts fields.

"You're never really sure what you are going to see," said Acevedo, a frequent rider, who has noticed that people from outside the borough suggest places to see or eat at.

"The trolley into a lesson on the opportunities that the Bronx offers to us all," he said.

"[Our program] is popular because people are looking for something to do that is open to all ages, and is [enjoyable]," said Ellen Pollan, director of the South Bronx Cultural Corridor. Each venue has someone to greet you and explain what you are seeing. It's an authentic experience about the Bronx."

Take the kids

Families are encouraged to take advantage of the educational and entertainment value of the program, and are among the most frequent and satisfied of trolley customers.

On a recent tour, Pollan, who's has hosted nearly 100 rides, invited a young family with four little boys, all wearing Yankee caps.

The kids were excited, looking outside the windows with curiosity. Taking notice of it, once the trolley reached the first stop, Pollan reminded the family that they were welcome to continue the ride, or get

off and savor the annual artists open studio tour offered that day.

The mother paused for moment then said "we are going to try something new!" And off they went.

"It's a [seamless] way for parents to expose children to arts and culture," observed Phil Cardone, trolley coordinator and information manager for the Bronx Council on the Arts.

"We trick them!" he added jokingly, mindful of the attraction the trolley has for kids. "They come to have fun and are introduced to the Bronx Museum, Hostos, Pregones, even the artists."

The trolley has brought together local artists with audiences who might have not had the opportunity to learn about them. Bountiful creativity and great food joints, however, are not the only catchy elements of the Bronx Cultural Trolley, voted "the most successful of the city's trolley routes" in a 2007 report published by the Center for an Urban Future.

A good portion of it is due to the marketing savvy of the South Bronx Cultural Corridor's artistic and business community that understands the importance of cross-promotion and radiates a genuine spirit of collaboration, which rubs well on visitors. News of the venture has attracted tourists — some of whom are now regulars — from as far as Japan, New Zealand, Germany, Italy, Spain and Belgium.

Even on warm days, and considering that some of the studios are walk-ups and have no air conditioning, reported Cardone, "people do not [get deterred]. "They just love it!" Providing a meaningful alternative to traditional summer activities, participation on the cultural trolley can also give children an interesting subject for conversation once they return to school, said Acevedo, when someone asks "so, what did you do this summer vacation?"

The Bronx Cultural Trolley is wheelchair accessible and offers additional runs on selected Saturdays. For more information on its schedule and up-to-date routes, call (718) 931-9500 x33 or e-mail trolley@bronxarts.org. You can also visit the Bronx Culture on the Arts Web site at www.bronxarts.org.

