

Written by Emily Moroz

People passing by the old Garfield Elementary School building on 1500 East in Sugar House may see only an aging, slightly decrepit school building.

To Cara Despain, it's so much more.

Despain and Kenny Riches are staff and co-curators of the Visual Art Institute (VAI), which has been housed at Garfield, a nonprofit after-school art program for youth ages 5-18, since 1978.

The Visual Art Institute was established by Stephanie Burn, a former art teacher at Utah State University. In 1998 Bruce Robertson became the executive director. He invited instructors and students of diverse backgrounds and artistic ability into the nostalgic atmosphere of the old elementary school. Other institutions have shared the space with the VAI in the past, including Montessori and Realms of Inquiry.

"This building has so much history, but not many people know what's going on inside of it now," says Despain.

Despain and Riches, both artists themselves, are spearheading the institute's current project, the GARFO (as in Garfield) Gallery. To build a creative dynamic among students, artists and contemporary art through exhibitions and events is a goal of the gallery. On Friday, May 29th, GARFO held its opening event "1982: Let's Start Here," a 1980s-themed exhibit featuring local artists Trent Call, Jan Andrews, Tessa Lindsey, Gentry Blackburn, Davina Pallone and others.

"The GARFO Gallery is going to invite community members inside to meet the teachers, artists, and students here, and explore our space," adds Riches. Executive Director Robertson says he's committed to continue the institute's mission of fostering a creative environment for youth of all socio-economic backgrounds and is excited about expanding institute programs and making full use of the Garfield building's potential.

"I've been working here on Saturdays and entire families come by and knock on the front door,

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asking if they can come inside and see where their grandparents went to school. We want to revitalize the space and make the residents proud of this building again." A large-scale community art center would prove highly beneficial for the neighborhood, promoting interaction between the Institute, students, faculty and other nonprofit organizations with the surrounding community.

Riches and Despain hope to host more exhibitions in the future that bring arts enthusiasts into a new area. "There's been a disconnect between the younger, downtown arts scene and other communities in the city," Despain says.

Riches opened Kayo Gallery on South Broadway in 2004, bringing local and contemporary art into the spotlight for monthly Gallery Strolls. Having since handed Kayo's reins to current owner Shiloh Jackson, Riches is still committed to expanding Utah's contemporary arts scene.

For the past couple months, Riches and Despain have been gathering their "army" of hardworking volunteers, including friends and fellow artists, to help gut, paint and prepare the gallery for showing art. The gallery space includes a smaller area for the institute's student work. Plans for a June show are in the making.

A few years ago the Salt Lake Board of Education sold the building to Salt Lake City, which wanted the plot for a neighborhood police station. The police station was never built. Recent rumors have Westminster College buying the property. Everyone at the Visual Art Institute hopes they can continue their work and uphold the creative environment that has been cherished for so many years. "We're already set up for instruction, internships and arts education," offers Robertson. "The VAI is very interested in collaborating with other organizations, nonprofits, and members of the Salt Lake arts community. There's so much we'd like to do with the open space."

Summer Workshops at the VAI

Summer Figure Academy: Intensive 2-week figure workshops for junior high and high school students

1st Session: July 6-17

2nd Session: July 20-31

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Monday-Friday, 9 a.m.-12 p.m. and 1-6 p.m. daily. \$500/session. Students are responsible for their own supplies & meals.

Art at the Aviary: Summer drawing workshop for elementary students
July 6-17

At the Tracy Aviary, Liberty Park, 589 E 1300 South

Monday-Friday, 10 a.m.-11:30 a.m. daily. Cost for 10 days is \$190

perstudent; includes admission to the Aviary, a VAI t-shirt and all art supplies

Visual Art Institute and GARFO Gallery, 1838 S 1500 E, 801-474-3796,
www.visualartinstitute.org