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The Blue Sky Project

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A new summer arts program at the University of Dayton will bring professional artists from around the country to Dayton to work hand-in-hand with local young people in creating new works of contemporary art.

The Blue Sky Project, founded in 2004 in a Chicago suburb, has made Dayton its permanent home after forming a partnership with the University of Dayton earlier this year.

"Blue Sky fits perfectly with the University of Dayton's Marianist values of living and learning in community and reaching out to engage others," said Paul Benson, dean of the University's College of Arts and Sciences. The University has pledged financial support for the program, two houses in the student neighborhood and the use of ArtStreet studios and other arts buildings.

The eight-week program hosts five artists who are committed to innovation and collaboration with young people to create new works. More than 60 artists working in a variety of disciplines applied for residency. More on the selected artists is below.

The Blue Sky Project recruits local teens to work with the artists in small teams for 22 hours a week. In addition, each artist will be assigned a local college student who will work as a paid intern.

(Follow the Blue Sky link on the right to download an application, receive more information about Blue Sky and view past exhibits. Applications are also available at any public library in Montgomery County and must be postmarked by May 1.)

Blue Sky is unlike other youth art programs in its focus on collaboration, not a "teacher-student" relationship, founder Peter Benkendorf said. Teens work with, not under, professional artists. This allows the artists to stretch their creative boundaries and take on more ambitious projects.

"We want everyone involved, both teens and artists, to come away from their summer having been both leaders and participants," Benkendorf said.

Blue Sky's reputation has been advancing steadily over the years. Program director Mequitta Ahuja, an accomplished painter lauded by New York Times art critic Holland Cotter, will open her second solo show at BravinLee in New York City on April 3.

Final projects have been exhibited at Priska Juschka Fine Art in New York City, featured in The New Yorker and exhibited and sold at ArtChicago. At least 12 Blue Sky youth alumni are now pursuing art degrees in college.

The Dayton community at large will also benefit from the Blue Sky Project. The artists will speak to local arts organizations and students and foster work that addresses community issues. A final exhibition will take place in the Oregon Arts District in August, and Blue Sky will be open to the public whenever it is in session.

"For the artists to be able to come to a vibrant arts community like Dayton and have an opportunity to participate in that community will really enrich the program," Benkendorf said. "That artistic stimulus and the intellectual stimulation from the University of Dayton didn't exist before."

Benkendorf said he is excited about the possibility of expanding the Blue Sky model into other areas in Dayton. Future projects might include putting engineers and students together or a project built around environmental sustainability.

"The Blue Sky Project affirms the University of Dayton as a place where high quality artistic activity goes on and draws in the wider community," Benson said. "As it continues to be built into one of the top artist-in-residence programs in the nation, I'm excited about the opportunities for the University, for Dayton and for other area colleges to engage young people and keep them in Dayton as they pursue their art and their education."

The program begins Monday, June 15.

The artists and their projects
• Malic Amalya, a filmmaker from Seattle, will explore the differences between how individuals see themselves and the world, and how others actually view them.

• Katherine Mann, a painter from Baltimore, will create abstracts about the systems and relationships of small elements within a whole composition.

• Lisa Nonken, a sculptor from Chicago, will explore the notion of public monuments and memorials.

• Alan Strathmann, a sculpture, sound and video installation artist from Chicago, will investigate the intersection between nature and technology.

• Rodney Veal, a dancer and videographer from Dayton, Ohio, will combine choreography and film to translate everyday imagery into artistic expression.

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