

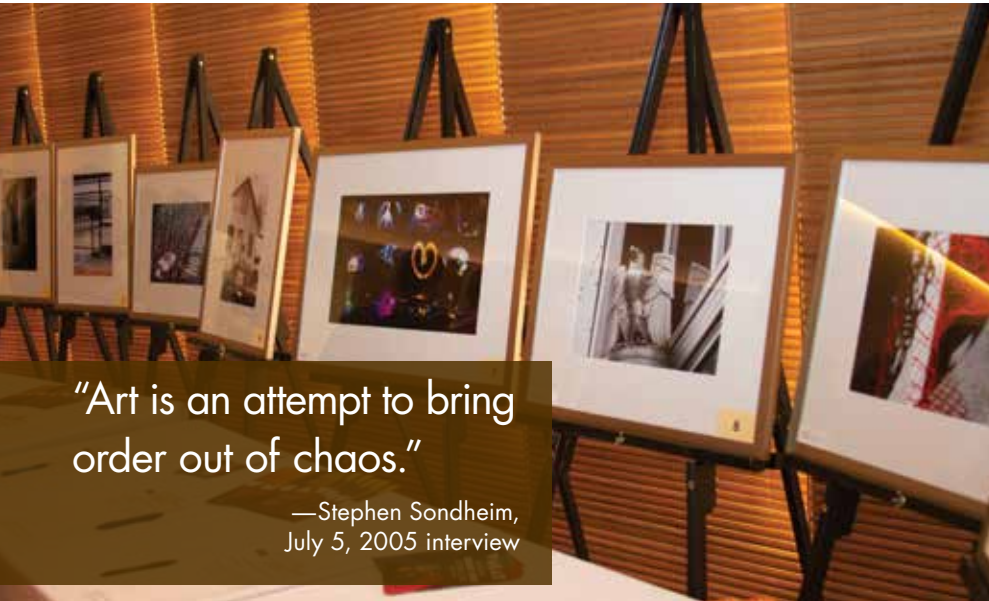
Order from Chaos

Art Brings Justice and Hope to the Annual Meeting



Bruce A. Courtade

Photo by Tammy Allen for the State Bar of Michigan



"Art is an attempt to bring order out of chaos."

—Stephen Sondheim,
July 5, 2005 interview

The 10 finalist photos by students in WMCAT's advanced photography course were featured in an art contest/silent auction during the Celebrating Diversity reception at the SBM Annual Meeting.

Imagine for a moment that you are a single parent, the victim of physical abuse. Your estranged spouse, after draining your bank account of the little bit you had saved over the years, files a petition to have your child taken away from you. You've lost your home and are left with no place to live and nowhere to turn. You need help. You need an attorney but are struggling to keep your baby clothed and fed; you cannot afford to hire a lawyer, and Legal Aid closed its local office due to lack of funding. To get free legal assistance, you need to arrange transportation to the nearest office—more than an hour away. Your life is, in a word, chaos.

Now, imagine for a moment being 15 years old, living in a neighborhood that has seen more than its share of poverty and decay. Your family struggles daily to get by. You've rarely traveled outside of your city;

in many ways, your world is defined by the six-square-block neighborhood in which you live. You are a creative type—you love to draw and write, and see the world in a way others deem odd or strange or different. You go to a school where there are few, if any, art classes, and no safe places where you can express your creativity. You know school is important, but your parents never attended college—perhaps did not even graduate from high school—and more than 50 percent of the kids who began 9th grade with you won't graduate, so it is hard to imagine you could ever go away to a university or break out of the generational poverty that challenges so many in your neighborhood. You know you are creative, talented, and special, but you're not sure anyone else sees that, so you keep it bottled up inside. Your world is, in a word, chaos.

And then, one day, you walk into a place filled with bright colors and fresh flowers.

Adults talk to you and treat you with respect. They teach you about artwork, digital photography, and graphic design. You make your own t-shirts and skateboards. You help make a mural that wins second place in Grand Rapids' ArtPrize and help design a label that goes on 1,000 fruit-juice bottles sold in stores throughout your community. Your photographs are displayed not just in your hometown, but in Carnegie Hall. You see the Great Lakes for the first time. You tour Northern Michigan University and the University of Michigan. You design an ornament displayed on the national Christmas tree in Washington, D.C. You and your classmates tour Chicago, New York, and Washington, D.C. Of the 27 high school seniors who came with you to this remarkable place four years ago, 26 are like you: high school graduates. You see a future for the first time—a way out of the cycle of generational poverty.

Art *can* bring order out of chaos, and it does so every day at the West Michigan Center for Arts and Technology (WMCAT; <http://www.wmcat.org>). WMCAT offers after-school programming in arts and technology to high school students from Grand Rapids public schools and a few surrounding districts. Students can take classes in graphic arts, photography, fiber arts, and fine arts. Teens who have spent at least one school year at WMCAT can also join project-based design teams that work with local businesses on specific, career-based experiences. Through participation at WMCAT, teens can move toward success in school and career. This spring, 96 percent of the high school seniors at WMCAT graduated—far above their districts' average graduation rate.

These life-changing programs are hosted in a world-class facility in downtown Grand Rapids. Part of the WMCAT culture is that if

The students were given the assignment to photograph what they thought represented the following traits, characteristics, or qualities in their world: diversity (or lack thereof), justice (or injustice), or equality (or inequality).

you treat people with dignity, invite them to learn in a space that promotes success, and give them the right tools, they will aspire to great things. WMCAT is a place of innovation, imagination, and inspiration.

On Thursday, September 20, WMCAT's students used their cameras and artistic talent to try to help bring order to the chaos in others' lives: the chaos that results from extreme poverty and the resulting lack of access to our justice system.

As part of the Celebrating Diversity reception held during the 2012 SBM Annual Meeting in Grand Rapids—which happened to coincide with the beginning of ArtPrize, the world's largest art contest (see <http://www.artprize.org> for more information)—the State Bar hosted its own unique art contest featuring the photographs of 10 local students who took part in WMCAT's advanced photography course during the summer. The students were given the assignment to photograph what they thought represented the following traits, characteristics, or qualities in their world: diversity (or lack thereof), justice (or injustice), or equality (or inequality).

The result was a series of submissions that provided insight into a world foreign to many of the readers of this magazine, seen through the eyes and lenses of those who live in it every day. From the more than 100 photos submitted by the students, WMCAT faculty and SBM staff chose 10 finalists whose works were displayed at the Celebrating Diversity reception in the Grand Rapids Art Museum. The display not only occurred during ArtPrize, but took place in the same venue featuring works by (among others) Picasso, Toulouse-Lautrec, Mathias Alten, Dali, Rembrandt, and other famous masters of their craft.

The 10 finalists were featured in a combination art contest and silent auction, the net



Cassie Jaffas, "Hand and Face"



Ariel Norder, "Rectangle"



Mara Severance, "Colorless"

16 President's Page

proceeds of which were divided between WMCAT and the Access to Justice Fund. The Access to Justice Campaign is a partnership of the State Bar, the Michigan State Bar Foundation, and Michigan's nonprofit legal aid agencies to increase funding for civil legal help for the poor, who often do not have resources to hire a lawyer when facing the loss of their home, family violence, or lack of access to medical care. So this

event helped bring order not only to the lives of young artists through recognition of their unique talents, but also to the lives of people across our state who face the daily chaos of extreme poverty and lack of access to the court system. Topping things off, the evening featured great music by Soulitivity, a wonderful all-attorney band from Washtenaw County that not only provided entertaining music and vocals pro bono, but got

many in attendance to show off their best moves on the dance floor!

The photograph on the cover of this issue of the *Bar Journal*—"Eagle" by WMCAT student artist Angellica Heidenfeld—received the most votes among those attending the Celebrating Diversity reception, but everyone who participated in the event or donated to WMCAT and the Access to Justice Fund was a winner. The other nine finalists, whose photos are included in this article for your enjoyment, were:

- Luis Flores, "Telephone"
- Stephanie Gonzalez, "Question"
- Cassie Jaffas, "Hand and Face"
- Brittany Kibbey, "Sepia Door" and "No Trespassing"
- Mercedes Mast, "Victim's House"
- Ariel Norder, "Rectangle"
- Mara Severance, "Colorless"
- Class Project, "Light Writing"

The SBM congratulates each of the finalists and thanks them for sharing their gifts, and in so doing, helping to ease the burdens of Michigan's poorest citizens and serving as role models for lawyers throughout the state. Likewise, the evening would not have been nearly as successful or enjoyable without the outstanding entertainment by Soulitivity, whose energy was contagious and added a fun new dynamic to the Celebrating Diversity reception.



Brittany Kibbey, "Sepia Door"



Luis Flores, "Telephone"



Brittany Kibbey, "No Trespassing"

Part of the WMCAT culture is that if you treat people with dignity, invite them to learn in a space that promotes success, and give them the right tools, they will aspire to great things.

I encourage all members of the Bar to embrace the model of the WMCAT student artists and the rock stars of Soulitivity and find a way to help bring order to the chaos in the lives of those less fortunate among our neighbors. If you can do so, you will have created a thing of beauty that may not be suitable for framing but will change lives in a deep and meaningful way.

And isn't that a thing of beauty in its own right? ■

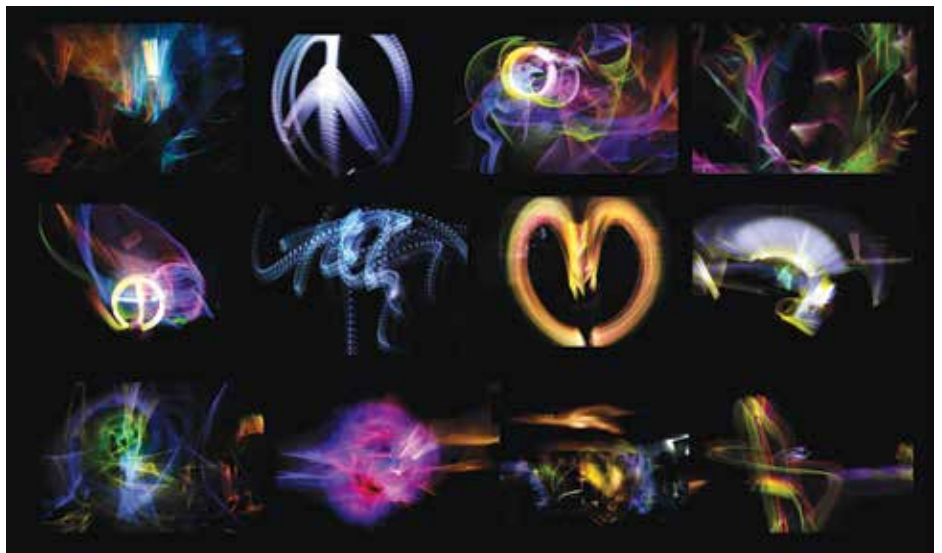
Editor's note: In addition to its youth education programs, WMCAT serves under- and unemployed adults through career training in medical coding, medical billing, and pharmacy technician. The associate-degree-level programs include extensive classroom time with instructors who are professionals in the field and a six-week externship with a local employer. While providing this instruction, WMCAT works to address personal and professional development. The holistic approach to serving adult students has led to more than 70 percent of graduates finding work in their fields within six months of graduation. These are positions that pay a living wage and offer a real pathway out of poverty. Collectively, WMCAT adult graduates from 2006 to 2011 earned more than \$5 million in wages. The impact for these graduates over the course of their careers (based on an average career of 20 years) is \$38.9 million.



Mercedes Mast, "Victim's House"



Stephanie Gonzalez, "Question"



Class Project, "Light Writing"

Photos courtesy of the West Michigan Center for Arts and Technology



WMCAT students helped produce this mural for ArtPrize 2011, earning second place overall.



WMCAT students enjoyed a trip to visit Northern Michigan University.