



This UrbanGlass Beadmaking Program Challenges and Changes Lives

By Shiloh Frederick

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For over twenty years UrbanGlass' beadmaking scholarship program has provided creative and and entrepreneurial skills to artsy, low-income women in New York.

When Lilly Burgos first saw an ad for The Bead Project on her Facebook feed, she brushed it off. Although she was interested in this free beadmaking course for low-income women offered by UrbanGlass, Burgos doubted that she would be accepted into the scholarship program.

"I was like, 'Nah! A scholarship? You know they're not going to give it to me,'" she recalled thinking. "I'm not going to be able to do it."

But a month later the same UrbanGlass program appeared again in her news feed. This time Burgos said to herself, "You know what? If you're already telling yourself no, then the answer is no. So, let me just apply." Now, almost one year after completing the program, Burgos has joined the chorus of alumni of The Bead Project who say the program changed their lives.

UrbanGlass knows the effect its twenty-year-old program has had on the lives of the economically disadvantaged women who have entered its studio. Aside from providing participants with ten weeks of instruction in the craft of beadmaking and jewelry assembly, UrbanGlass offers the Bead Project's students a "transformative experience." According to Amy Lemaire, who has been instructing the Bead Project for the past five years, the women who apply to the program tend to be seeking out this sort of life-changing experience.



Community building: Instructor Amy Lemaire shows off four years of Bead Exchange Bracelets. Each bead was made by a different Bead Project Artist. Photo credit: Amy Lemaire

While some women apply to the class with the goal of gaining enough skills to start their own Etsy store, Lemaire said, “Some people who come through here for the Bead Project are overcoming a major illness, a divorce or had some sort of life trauma and just needed to get back on track.” She continued, “For some people just showing up every week somewhere and starting to form a community, starting to be creative again and allocating time for themselves to have that activity, it’s a marker of success.”



Maria Aroche, a Bead Project alumna and teaching assistant, can craft a bead in mere minutes.

Maria Aroche was thinking of the program’s potential financial benefit when she applied to The Bead Project ten years ago. But she also wanted to reconnect with her lifelong fascination with fire and glassware. For years, she had been a stay-at-home mother in Queens, but a mid-life crisis drove her to finally realize that she wanted to work with glass. A search for nearby glass classes led her to The Bead Project at UrbanGlass. However, she soon learned how challenging beadmaking can be.

Burgos also found it difficult to work with glass for the first time. “In the beginning you’re terrified. You have a 2,000-degree torch in front of you,” she described. “There’s no dials, there’s no numbers, there’s no settings. [It has] to come to you intuitively.”

Although beadmaking is something each Bead Project participant has to learn to master on her own, the ten-week journey is anything but isolating. Lemaire explained that even though students join the program with different goals in mind, they bond over their common enthusiasm for the program.

“Everybody does have a slightly different goal according to wherever they’re at in life,” she said. “I think that really helps knock down the competition and builds the community stronger.”

Also strengthening the community is the network of The Bead Project alumni who return to the program to share their knowledge of the craft and of entrepreneurship with current students. Aroche has devoted the past five years to being the program’s teaching assistant, while Burgos served as last semester’s artist-in-resistance, giving pointers to the program’s participants as she developed her own artwork. “The process for me as a TA, seeing a group of ladies start from ‘I’m afraid to touch [the torch]’ to feeling confident and having a collection they can have at the trunk show on class ten is a journey I enjoy witnessing,” said Burgos.

To the creatively inclined woman who may still be hesitant to apply to The Bead Project, Aroche advised to just give it a try.

“The worst that can happen is that you didn’t like it, but at least you experienced it,” she said. “There’s no other experience that I have ever had that’s anything like this.”