



Local Heroes / The Buffalo Arts Studio team

Meet the team: Shirley Tokash Verrico, Zaineb Saleh, Jayne Hughes, and Ima Carrillo López

BY JENNIFER
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PHOTO BY KC KRATT

The profilees featured in this month's issue may not have instantly recognizable names, but to us they're famous. They do tireless work—often volunteered or minimally compensated—to support what makes life in Western New York (or anywhere) worth living: adequate housing, personal safety, good medical care, access to arts/culture, a healthy natural environment, and so much more. Meet more of our heroes: the team from Buffalo Arts Studio.

Executive director Alma Carrillo López, curator Shirley Tokash Verrico, and marketing and community development coordinator Zainab Saleh sit at the table

in the center of their office, at the center of the **Buffalo Arts Studio (BAS)** gallery. Education director Jayne Hughes is out of office this week. Over the course of an hour on an autumn morning, their words tumble and collide, overrun and interweave, as they hash out who they are and what they value.

Verrico arrives at this assertion early in the conversation: “We do the work,” she states plainly. “We do it and we are not promoters.” This makes Saleh’s job plain, since she is responsible for marketing. She responds, “It’s hard to represent what we do, because it is not all about saying how great we are. Part of my challenge is to represent the amazing work while remaining true to our character.” Complicating this is the fact that BAS is many things—studio space, art class space, exhibition space, and public art project generator—to many people.

The current BAS leadership group has been developed and interwoven to form a strong and diverse organization—a major player in Buffalo’s arts community.

Carillo López is quick, talkative, and warm. She earned her master's degree in public arts and cultural heritage at Brown University and, while there, collected oral histories for the Smithsonian Bracero project. Braceros were Mexican workers who were brought in by the United States to fill labor gaps from the 1940s to the 1960s; the project was significant in and of itself, but it also reflects

Carrillo López's interest in lifting up under-recognized voices and visions. Prior to moving to Buffalo, she served as the education director at Steelyard Arts, an industrial arts campus in Providence, Rhode Island. Verrico says, "Alma recognizes the transformative power of art. It's not just an aesthetic thing happening in the intellectual sphere, and that shapes the success of programming of our current incarnation." Both Saleh and Verrico comment on how Carrillo Lopez has continued a tradition of generosity at BAS.

It's a tradition that runs deep. On this day, in the TriMain Center, the gallery hosts Ani Hoover's playful and enticing sculptural masses of woven textile in an exhibition that invited public participation.

The TriMain was the first factory rehab in Buffalo, and its first tenant was BAS—this was long before the days of the city's current wave of such projects. Over the years, developers Elgin M. Wolfe and son Matt Wolfe have retained their vision of the arts as an anchor for the building, rather than pricing artists out once the building was established. The same type of generosity of spirit and vision was true of Joanna Angie, BAS cofounder and director for twenty years. As a resident artist, she has continued her involvement and support.

BAS hosts an ever-changing group of resident artists in affordable gallery space. "The relationships that exist between artists before and after they cross paths at BAS change. It's not a one-off for classes, it's not a one-off for exhibits. They see our commitment to them and they have commitment to us," Carrillo López elaborates. The line between resident artist/exhibitor/teacher/ public arts partner is more like a connecting line than a dividing one, she continues: "We're not just thinking about the organization itself, we are also thinking about our relationship with them and their well-being and we are looking forward to how those relationships are going to evolve over time."

It is difficult to detail the number and type of programs and contributions that this staff makes happen. Highlights of the BAS twenty-fifth anniversary include GatherX25, on March 25, which offers artworks from BAS artists through the years at a variety of price points. CreateX25 takes place during the summer and features hands-on events. Ongoing educational programming includes the Jumpstart program, which provides advanced art education and portfolio development to high school and middle school students who might otherwise not have access.

As BAS moves beyond its physical space, it has been a driving force for numerous public art projects. The Ray of Light mural in Masten Park, for example, was born of a complex and delicate process that involved many artistic and municipal partners. Work on the mural was completed by artists and students who have been part of BAS over the years.

"My personality is that I see the strengths and knowledge that different people bring," Carrillo López states. "Zaineb came here with a skill set that we needed, Shirley has her history here [at BAS] and history of teaching, and Jayne has such commitment to her students. There is not much ego that happens here. Every person here contributes, beyond what they need to." How to accomplish herculean tasks? You need a team.

Jennifer Connor is a teacher and frequent contributor to Spree.

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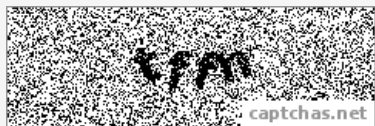
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