

ARTS

# Their best shots

Art project lets Arbor Hill second-graders put themselves in the picture

By Hina Tai

“She is getting crazy! She is getting wild!” exclaimed Sasha Sicurella, founder and director of the I AM: International Foundation. Sicurella zoomed her camera in on the face of Mavihaa Chandler, a second-grader at Arbor Hill Elementary, while Chandler eagerly posed for pictures sitting on top of a plastic crate in front of a white backdrop, surrounded by overgrown grass and stone walls.

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# A shot at art for kids

## BEST

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Sicurella's I AM: International Foundation partnered with Albany Barn, a nonprofit creative arts organization, to bring a three-day workshop to 22 second-grade students at Arbor Hill Elementary. Wednesday was the second of the three-part project series.

"I wanted to do something in my own backyard," said Sicurella. "Being the capital of New York, knowing that there are low-income areas in Albany trying to thrive and seeing the Albany Barn striving to adjust to those issues, I thought it would be a really nice partnership, since they work with people and art."

The I AM foundation is a nonprofit founded in 2010 designed to provide opportunities for disadvantaged children around the world to explore identity through art and self-portraiture.

Each project generally consists of three to six two-hour workshops. Children get a chance to participate in activities that complement self-portrait photography, the project's centerpiece, where each child snaps his or her own image with a remote control clicker. The photographs are then combined and displayed in a public exhibition.

An important part of the process is comparing and contrasting the photos of children from around the world, said Sicurella.

"The kids from Albany will now become part of this picture chain," she said, "when I go to Cambodia and Thailand in the fall, those pictures from Arbor Hill will become

part of their curriculum. In a way, those kids will travel and meet those kids."

Sicurella said one of the things she has learned from working with children from all over the world is that they share a common spirit.

"All of these kids from the slums of Mumbai to the underprivileged area in Israel to an orphanage in Romania — these kids all have this same spirit," she said, "They all want to be noticed. They're silly, they want to laugh, they want to joke around, they want to make crazy faces. They express the same inherent emotions that we all have. In a way, we kind of all know that, but being able to see that unfold before your eyes is really remarkable."

She hopes projects plant seeds that will bloom into something positive.

"Either that's a renewed sense of identity in the bigger picture, or if it's the fact that, 'Oh, I really like this picture of myself where I really liked that moment when I clicked that picture of myself.' There's tremendous value in an instant," Sicurella said.

Angela Caputo, a volunteer at Albany Barn and one of the coordinators for the I AM: Albany project, said it was exciting working with the children at Arbor Hill Elementary.

"Their enthusiasm and their having fun with it is a lot of fun to be around," she said.

Rachel Moore works for Albany Barn as the coordinator of the 1,700-square-foot exhibit space Stage 1 on Swan Street and is a coordinator for the I AM: Albany project.

"I'm really enjoying it. They seem to really accept us, and they want to draw stuff for us, which is nice because they are participants who really want to participate," Moore said.

The second-graders at Arbor Hill Elementary are energetic and resilient, Sicurella said.

"I know a lot of them don't have every single privilege, but they seem to be very aware, very smart and have this very dynamic energy," she said, "While it's hard to get all those 22 kids seated and quiet, it's OK that it's not (easy), because all that energy is good, positive energy."

The I AM: Albany project, which was sponsored by National Grid, will be displayed in an exhibit on Friday, Aug. 3, at Stage 1, 46-48 N. Swan St., Albany.

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### About Albany Barn

The Albany Barn, which runs the gallery space Stage 1, is working toward a larger project of converting the St. Joseph's Academy building into live/work spaces and an arts center. The organization will be holding a fundraising and groundbreaking event to mark the start of construction for the new arts spaces.

■ **When:** 5 to 9 p.m. Saturday, June 22

■ **Where:** Stage 1, 46-48 N. Swan St., Albany

■ **Tickets:** \$25 for single ticket; \$100 for two tickets plus two Albany Barn pint glasses, name(s) on event site, a 4-by-6-inch St. Joseph's print and event parking

■ **Info:** (518) 935-4858; <http://>