



## At Home Lampshades and Life Lessons

Peeking in on the Space Of Her Own project

—By Maureen L. Egan

It was a cavernous room, empty of people, devoid of personality except for the giant homemade pillows strewn about the industrial-carpeted floor. Covered in soft pink-and-blue fabric, often with flowery appliques — sewn on charmingly if not quite expertly — the 24-inch square pillows each sported a girl's name writ loud and proud in contrasting fabric. Suddenly, the dozen or so girls in the Space Of Her Own (SOHO) project whooshed into the room like a wave, and each rushed to find the pillow she had sewn with her mentor months before and hadn't seen since. What a reunion. They dove into their pillows and came up for air smiling wide, holding on for dear life. Their mentors sat beside them, and the celebration began.

SOHO, a partnership between the Visual Arts Center of Richmond, Art 180 and the Friends Association for Children in Jackson Ward, is an art-based mentoring program pairing devoted women volunteers with pre-teen girls. The idea was that with mentors, art instructors, guest chefs and other special visitors leading the way most Thursday evenings of the school year, the girls would share healthful meals, learn life skills and collaborate on creative projects, eventually taking home handmade, useful and unique additions to their bedrooms.

I was just a fly on the wall the few times I attended. At the beginning I saw a lot of running around, some occasional sulking when the food or the evening's chosen activities didn't



**LEFT:** Mentor Shaunn Casselle with a beaming Quanzunae Price after her SOHO room makeover. **TOP RIGHT:** Girls and their mentors, sprawled on pillows they made together, were mesmerized by VCU student-poet Nahid Koochkanrizi.

**ABOVE:** Anyeh Billups operates a potter's wheel at the Visual Arts Center.

suit and sweet openness when the girls made new discoveries. On the tour of the studios at the Visual Arts Center in the fall, the girls looked apprehensive and uncomfortable while they listened to an instructor in the clay studio. (Perhaps it was the propane torch he lit to explain a particular technique?) But a few minutes later these same girls, mesmerized by the working of the looms, shyly slid next to weavers they'd never met before and listened, rapt. They didn't want to leave.

I hadn't been present during the middle of SOHO when the relationships melded and the art instructors put the girls to work, so on the last night of the program in the spring I was curious to see the girls and their mentors ("divas" and "cheetahs" in SOHO slang) together. When the girls took turns at the pottery wheels, it was obvious how much more comfortable and confident they were. Even with more girls than working wheels, I saw patience and cooperation I hadn't seen earlier and a real willingness to try something new and difficult. (It's a good thing we don't let 12-year-olds drive; these girls pushed the pedal to the metal.)

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At the close of each meeting, the girls all participate in a "closing circle," where they shared something they were thankful for.

Later I saw desks they had embellished with their own designs: some whimsical, some carefully crafted, others minimalist. One girl had painted the word "Dream" amid vibrantly colored suns and moons. There was a stack of decorated journals ready to accept the girls' drowsy doodles or wild hopes, and a collection of lampshades painted in purples, pinks and blues. And, of course, the pile of pillows, ready for delivery.

The night before I had watched the girls sprawled on their pillows, clutching them tightly, captivated by a college-student spoken-word poet. Awestruck by her poise and talent, they ooh-ed and ahh-ed in response to her verses, asked thoughtful questions and cheered for an encore. It was a throat-catching scene. I was sure that when they sink into their pillows at home and squeeze them, they'll feel the closeness and wonder of that night, and remember all the warmth and work they shared with their mentors, instructors and coordinators throughout the months of SOHO. I hope they hold on tightly to the lively, lovely girls they are, full of promise and possibility and purpose.

It was time to put all the pieces together in each girl's room at home. Cars and trucks were loaded with the handmade work of many months. In theory, SOHO culminated in a bedroom redo for each girl, but the reality was greater than the sum of all the crafty parts. The transformed "space of her own" wasn't in an apartment or house so much as inside each girl's heart and mind. How perfect that those pillows are big enough for both.