



City of Arts & Innovation

# News Release

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**“The Art of Giving Gala” Raises More Than \$98,000 for Riverside Arts Academy**

*Art ‘N Kids donates more than \$60,000 to the Academy from its custom furniture auction*

RIVERSIDE, Calif. – The Riverside Arts Academy, which offers free and low-cost lessons in art, music, dance and the arts to young people across Riverside, received a financial boost recently from “The Art of Giving Gala,” which raised more than \$98,000 for the program’s ongoing operations.

The Nov. 30 Gala at the Cesar Chavez Community Center, was highlighted by a \$60,000 donation from Art ‘N Kids, a local organization that made and sold custom furniture. The organization was honored along with Alvord Unified School District Superintendent Sid Salazar for their commitment to the Riverside Arts Academy.

Alpin Hong, a world-renowned pianist who is scheduled to perform Jan. 30 with the Riverside County Philharmonic, made a special appearance. Attendees raised money through the purchase of tickets and by participating in a silent auction.

“The Art of Giving Gala really captured the community spirit that has helped start, sustain and grow the Riverside Arts Academy,” said City Councilman Andy Melendrez, who represents the area where the Academy started and was part of the host committee for the Gala along with the rest of the City Council and Mayor Rusty Bailey. “The money raised from this event will benefit young people from all around our city.”

The Riverside Arts Academy is collaboration between community volunteers and the City of Riverside Parks, Recreation and Community Services Department. Volunteers got the program started and advocated for City support, which includes \$50,000 per year for instructor salaries and supplies and a like amount in support and oversight from Parks staff.

The Academy started about three years ago at the Chavez Center in the Eastside neighborhood and has since expanded to the Casa Blanca and Arlanza neighborhoods.

About 300 young people are involved with the school at any given time, and more than 2,000 children have participated in the program by taking classes in ballet, violin, wind instruments, drums, piano, art, ballet folklorico, theater arts and more.

Art 'N Kids is a 501(c)(3) non-profit organization overseen by a board of directors including three sisters -- Dolores Mumper, Elizabeth Stralka, Kathleen Hamilton -- and their friends, Jane Block and Dawn Pia. The organization got its start when the three sisters received a donation of 38 pieces of original woodworking art furniture from their brother, John Verwiel.

The works are from the “Billy and Me Collection” that Verwiel started in 1986 with his developmentally disabled brother, Billy, following the death of their mother. For years, the two brothers gave pieces of art to family members as Christmas gifts. More than two decades later, John Verwiel gave his sisters 38 pieces of art to use in a fundraising drive.

With the 38 artworks in hand, the sisters and friends formed a non-profit organization, Art ‘N Kids, and began looking for a worthy cause. They were introduced to The Riverside Arts Academy through Collette Lee, a local real estate professional, in June, 2014 and began their fundraising journey.

“They are our Fairy Godmothers,” said Lee, associate broker with Windermere Tower Properties in Riverside. “Their gift will allow the Riverside Arts Academy to continue to grow to help disadvantaged youth in our community through our after-school programs.”

An online fundraising campaign continues at: <https://www.razoo.com/us/story/Riverside-Community-Services-Foundation>

“The Riverside Arts Academy is a great example of the community stepping up and advocating for an idea, then turning advocacy into action with hard work and collaboration to bring that idea to fruition,” Mayor Bailey said. “Their efforts really illustrate a commitment to the children of our community and the future of our city.”