

Empowering Design

PATRICK PLANETA OPENS NEW WORLDS FOR BOSTON YOUTH

In January, South Boston nonprofit Artists for Humanity (AFH) appointed Planeta chair of its board of directors.

Founded in 1991, AFH provides under-resourced urban youth—97% of the organization's participants come from low- or very low-income homes—with professional training and real, paid employment opportunities in the industries of art and design, offering both personal growth through self-expression and tangible, marketable job skills. AFH has grown to become one of the largest employers of young people in the city of Boston, and Planeta, a gay interior designer and founder of Planeta Design Group in the South End, is poised to help it expand in even more exciting ways. He's leading the board as it works to fulfill a \$28 million capital campaign that will add a massive 30,000-square new building to the organization's existing facility, the AFH Epicenter, that will double the number of teen artists employed and provide many more educational opportunities.

Planeta, who started exploring his own passion for art and design at an early age, says that supporting AFH comes from a personal place. He knows firsthand the positive role that the arts community can play in empowering young people who might otherwise feel “left by the wayside.”

“For me, it [the arts] was about finding a place to fit in,” says Planeta, who admits it could be “difficult” to grow up gay amid the white picket fences of Connecticut, where

he attended all-boys Catholic schools. “The arts have always been a place for people who feel like they don’t fit in for any reason—from sexual preference to poverty. When I hear these young people speak passionately about what they’re doing, it really resonates with me.”

And Planeta, who has supported AFH in some capacity for the last 10 years, puts his own professional reputation where his mouth is. He has commissioned AFH's young designers to create work, from rooftop sculptures to signage, for his own high-profile projects—like Alloy, a 122-unit luxury condo development at Somerville's buzz-worthy Assembly Row.

“When I hear these young people speak passionately about what they’re doing, it really resonates with me.”

Patrick Planeta

AFH has so far raised over \$19 million for its capital campaign, and groundbreaking for the new facility is scheduled for early summer. The AFH Epicenter was the first building in Boston to achieve LEED Platinum certification, the highest designation for energy sustainability, and this new project is shooting for the next step: an “e-positive” approach that actually returns more energy to the power grid than it consumes. AFH teens also helped inform plans for the new facility, slated to open in September 2018, which will house elements like a retail store, cafe, and new “Maker Studios” boasting state-of-the-art technologies for disciplines like video production and 3D printing.

The more skills AFH can impart to youth, the better. About 40% of the organization's participating teens use their employment through AFH to help support their families.

Planeta lends his time, resources and in-the-know network to other organizations too—including the United South End Settlements, which will host a major annual fundraiser, the Neighborhood Gala, on May 24. But as he steps into his new role as chair, AFH is certainly stealing the lion's share of Planeta's attention. Its mission, and the unique respect it offers to its young participants—who receive real training, real work and real pay—have designed a perfect outlet for engagement and empowerment.

“It doesn’t make these young people into victims. From a social aspect, that’s really important to me,” says Planeta. AFH is lucky to him in its orbit. [x]