



Making New York a Masterpiece



MOMA MOMENT: Artist Xavier Simmons, 41, credits some recent successes to the “huge impact” of The New York Community Trust Van Lier Fellowship. Here she’s shown in March, 2016, with her acrylic-on-wood painting, “The Gold Miner’s Mission,” at the Museum of Modern Art’s Modern Window on 53rd Street.

I ART INY



Following a couple's wishes, The New York Community Trust created a unique fellowship for artists—and 25 years later, their successes enrich our world.

Xavieria Simmons has had an unusual life, even for someone who creates sculpture, photography, video, sound, and live performances for a living. In her early twenties, she spent two years walking with Buddhist monks across the eastern United States, the Caribbean, and western Africa to visit key sites in the trans-Atlantic slave trade.

Simmons' career is testament to hard work and great timing. In 2012, just when she pined to try new painting techniques, she received an Edward and Sally Van Lier Fellowship created by The New York Community Trust. That helped pay for a year in the Studio Museum of Harlem's prestigious artist-in-residence program.

"I had a chance to focus on my art, travel to museums, and grow as a thinker," Simmons says. Since then, the U.S. State Department and the Bronx Museum of Art chose her as a creative ambassador to travel to Sri Lanka. Most recently, the Museum of Modern Art commissioned a 20-foot-wide painting for the front window of its midtown

building. Standing by it on a recent evening, she accepted accolades from artists, tourists, and even a waiter from the museum's restaurant.

That's typical of the success of many recipients of Van Lier Fellowships, which The Trust started in 1991 to help emerging artists. Since then, \$17 million has been awarded for fellowships through 100 arts training groups, ranging from well-known institutions such as Manhattan's Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater to smaller groups such as the Ghetto Film School in the Bronx.

So far, about 2,000 artists have been Van Lier fellows. Their work has appeared from Broadway to Berlin. One received a MacArthur "genius grant," another won a Pulitzer Prize, and a third was a Pulitzer finalist. Many now mentor a new generation of artists.

In 2015, as the fellowship neared its 25th anniversary, a consultant interviewed former fellows and the nonprofit groups that hosted them. Participants agreed the fellowships gave them three crucial resources to establish careers: time, money, and training.

CONTINUED ON NEXT PAGE

CONTINUED FROM PREVIOUS PAGE

“Receiving the Van Lier Fellowship changed my life,” said Darius Jones, a jazz composer and saxophone player who has traveled widely since being a fellow. “I felt emboldened to experiment and become the artist I am today.”

Ask Kyra Brickhouse about her fellowship at Rosie’s Theater Kids, an arts group started by comedian Rosie O’Donnell: “I would not have been able to accomplish what I’ve accomplished or stay afloat at high school,” says Brickhouse, who went on to the LaGuardia High School of Music, Art, and Performing Arts.

All this thanks to an arts-loving couple—a real estate developer and a performer who appeared in the Ziegfeld Follies. And thanks to The Trust’s determination to follow their wishes.

Edward and Sally Van Lier often recalled the early days of their marriage, soon after the Depression, when they lived in a fifth-floor walk-up in Manhattan. The Van Liers delighted in introducing young visitors to performances and art exhibitions. After Edward’s death in 1978, Sally told The Trust she wanted to set up a fund to help talented, aspiring artists, especially those with very little money.

The Trust’s program staff asked experts how to use the money most effectively. The consensus: Artists need financial assistance, mentoring, and other help at two critical junctures—before they go to a conservatory, and when they’re trying to launch careers.

These days, it seems the fellows are everywhere. During the 2016 inauguration of the Metropolitan Museum’s new building, the Met Breuer, visitors crowded around Vijay Iyer. He was named Musician of the Year by the Jazz Journalists Association, he won a MacArthur Fellowship, and he was appointed

an arts professor at Harvard. Before all that, he was a Van Lier Fellow.

The fellowship can make the difference between following a passion or giving up, and between staying in New York or moving away. “New York is increasingly tough for artists,” says Xaviera Simmons, “since none of us are gazillionaires.”

Playwright Kristoffer Diaz says he’s grateful for his fellowship: Not only did he get underwriting to do research and produce a work, but he also got a \$10,000 stipend. “At 26 years old, \$10,000 was a game changer for me—that almost doubled my salary.”

Kerry McCarthy, who oversees the program for The Trust, says the fellowships’ impact goes well beyond individual artists. Nonprofit arts groups say by hosting Van Lier Fellows from different backgrounds, they are adding diversity to fields ranging from choreography to sculpture.

For example, Van Lier Fellows have infused Hispanic, Asian, and African-American perspectives into New Dramatists, a highly regarded group that offers writing studios, rehearsal spaces, and mentoring for aspiring playwrights. Diaz was a fellow there 10 years ago, and that experience inspired him. A finalist for the 2010 Pulitzer Prize in drama, he returned to New Dramatists as a resident playwright.

Recent New Dramatist fellows include Jackie Sibblies Drury, whose Van Lier project turned into a play about racial issues that made its premiere in 2016. Another fellow, Charice Castro Smith, has broken into a male-dominated industry and is working on a project for ABC TV.

This year at New Dramatists, the number of applications for Van Lier Fellowships rose from 10 to 50, Diaz says. “I can’t help thinking Mr. and Mrs. Van Lier must be beaming somewhere, gratified about what they created.” ■

By David L. Marcus

OUR NEWEST ARTS FELLOWSHIP

The New York Community Trust hopes the Van Lier program will inspire donors to work with The Trust and its suburban divisions on creative ways to carry out their legacies. That’s what happened when Harold Valentine, a musician in Larchmont, wanted to support young artists as they made art and pursued careers.

In 2005, the Emily and Harold E. Valentine and Evelyn Gable Clark Scholarship Fund started at our Westchester Community Foundation. Valentine Fellows include musicians, sculptors, and visual artists. Some have earned national recognition. After being a fellow based at the Jacob Burns Film Center in Pleasantville, filmmaker Tara Clune was named to a prestigious fellowship at Sundance.



Edward and Sally Van Lier enjoyed taking younger friends to museums and concerts. Sally set up a fund to train “gifted young persons who aspire to a career in the arts.”

PERFORMANCE ART

Connecting to Mentors

In his early 20s, Niegel Smith lacked contacts to make it in the theater. Though he went to Dartmouth College, he'd spent his adolescence in Detroit—his father was a corrections officer and his mother worked at Walmart. During his Van Lier Fellowship at Manhattan's Second Stage Theater, he reviewed scripts, developed projects, and worked as an assistant director. That led to a meeting with the legendary director and choreographer Bill T. Jones, who hired Smith as associate director of "Fela!" on Broadway. Recently, Smith, 36, was chosen from 110 applicants to be artistic director of The Flea, an edgy, off-off-Broadway theater that also hosts Van Lier Fellows.

A photograph of Niegel Smith, a man with a beard and a blue denim shirt, sitting on a red Werner ladder. He is smiling and looking towards the camera. The background is a theater rehearsal space with wooden chairs and a wall of exposed brick or wood paneling. The ladder has a blue and white logo that says "WERNER".

“Some of my most enduring relationships in this business are a direct result of the Van Lier Fellowship.”

NIEGEL SMITH



DANCE

Mastering New Moves

The son of a construction worker and a teacher in Crown Heights, Jean-Daniel John had no interest in dance until he joined a middle school production, where he tried capoeira, a Brazilian martial art combining dance and acrobatics. He enrolled in Brooklyn's Ifetayo Cultural Arts Academy and, at age 16, received a two-year Van Lier Fellowship. "It exposed me to different dance techniques—classical, modern, contemporary, jazz—I couldn't get enough," says John, now 20. Soon he was performing at the famed Apollo Theater, and for Michelle Obama at the White House. He's heading to Howard University's dance program: "I'll keep dancing until I can't dance any longer."

“Dancing as a teenager, I learned discipline, focus, multi-tasking, and I became better at academics.”

JEAN-DANIEL JOHN



CLASSICAL MUSIC

Hitting Higher Notes

Growing up on the Lower East Side, Jessie Montgomery wanted to play classical music but couldn't find many African-American role models. After her parents divorced and finances got tight, a Van Lier Fellowship let Montgomery continue her studies at the Third Street Music Settlement. An inspiring teacher led Montgomery to revamp her playing style, and she went on to the Juilliard School. After graduation, she became a Van Lier Fellow again, with the American Composers Orchestra—a “true turning point,” because she started composing. She now performs around the world and finds herself a role model. (A girl from Missouri wrote to say she was profiling a “living composer”—34-year-old Montgomery—for Black History Month in 2016.)

“As a composer, I feel like I’m creating works that stand the test of time.”

**JESSIE
MONTGOMERY**

THE ART OF GIVING

Years ago, two donors created a fund in The Trust in their will. The purpose: to support emerging artists.

We shaped that generous gift into fellowships for creative young people, so they can focus on their work and not just survival. This smart philanthropy has helped New York nonprofit arts organizations bolster the careers of painters, photographers, musicians, dancers, and playwrights from a wide variety of backgrounds.

Are you interested in making a difference in the arts, education, the environment, or human justice? How about the lives of children or the elderly?

With a few simple steps, you, too, can set up a fund in The New York Community Trust or our suburban divisions. Our experts can bring your charitable visions to life, making grants to excellent nonprofits that help people in every way imaginable.

Together, we'll support the causes you care about. Forever.

Contact Jane Wilton at (212) 686-2563 or janewilton@nyct-cfi.org
909 Third Avenue, 22nd Floor | New York, NY 10022 | (212) 686-0010

Visit GiveTo.nyc