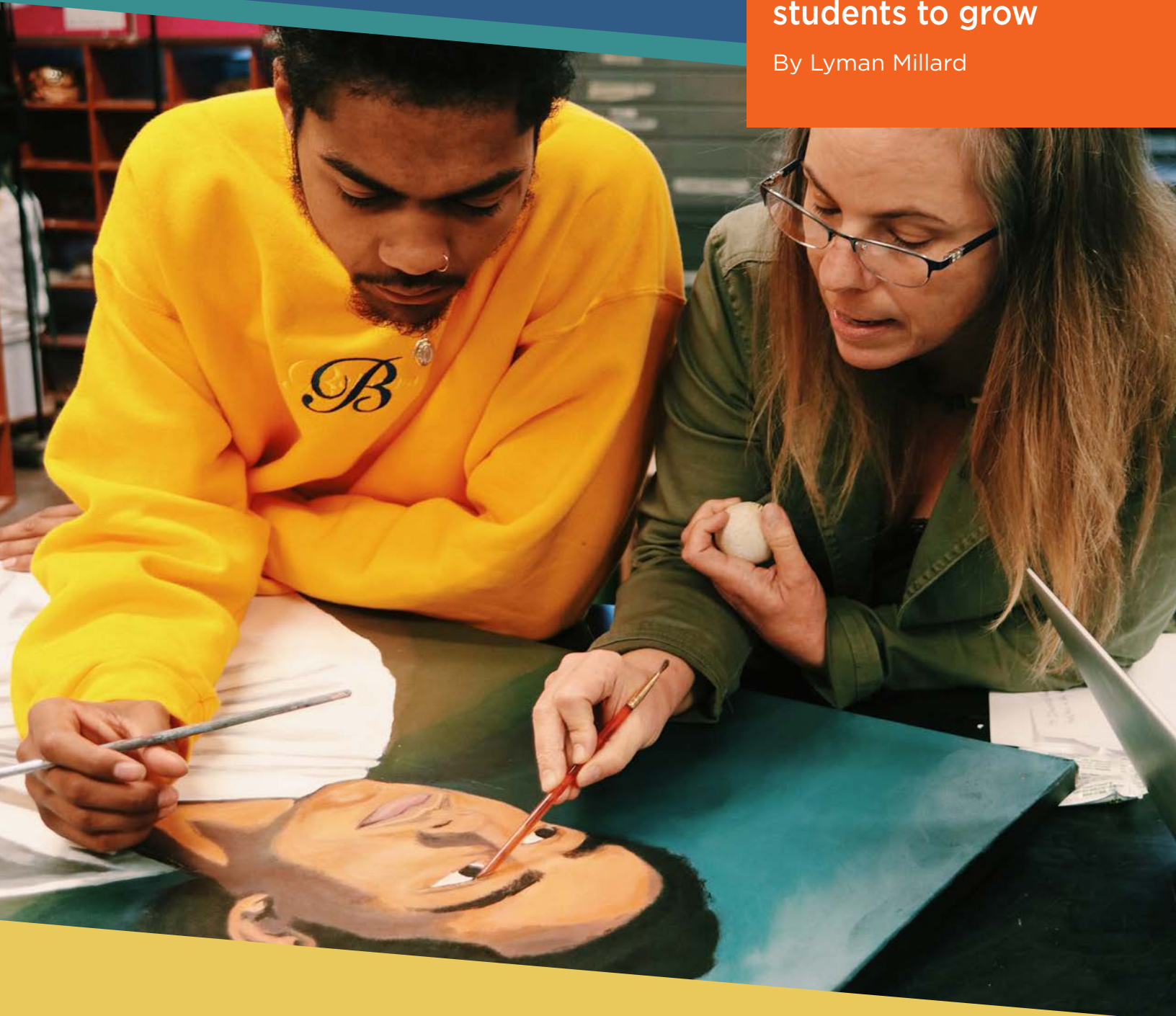


PATHWAY TO SUCCESS

Arts & College
Preparatory Academy
creates safe spaces for
students to grow

By Lyman Millard





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Foreword

Parents, when surveyed, routinely tell us that school safety is one of their top priorities when choosing a school. Though what exactly constitutes a “safe” school likely varies, for many it means a place where children feel welcomed, accepted, and don’t have to endure teasing, derision, or worse. Yet for too many students, finding such a school is no easy matter: national data indicate that one in every five U.S. students reports being bullied, and about one in ten say they’re made fun of, insulted, or called names while at school.

Creating schools where young people feel secure is no walk in the park. But one avenue, made possible through the charter school model, is to develop schools that honor and respect students whose unique interests may be marginalized in other settings. The profile that follows offers an inside look at one Ohio charter school that has created a safe environment for adolescents needing something different in their high school experience. Founded almost twenty years ago, the Columbus-based Arts & College Preparatory Academy (ACPA) embraces students who, for various reasons, have struggled to fit in at other schools. As author Lyman Millard tells us, one such student is Avante Martin, whose passion for the arts made him feel out of place in his district school. But with its strong focus on the arts, ACPA has become the perfect home for Avante to hone his artistic talents while also gaining a rigorous academic education. Encouragingly, with a facility expansion now complete, ACPA is poised to reach more Central Ohio students needing an opportunity to attend a high-quality school where they belong.

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— AARON CHURCHILL
Ohio Research Director



You would expect to see excellent student art in the lobby of the Arts & College Preparatory Academy (ACPA), a charter public school on the east side of Columbus. It is almost a prerequisite for any arts-focused high school. But even among the well-made pieces that cover the high school's walls, one painting stands out: an arresting and deeply expressive self-portrait of a young man painting himself. Over the past few years, the artist, Avante Martin, has grown into one of the most talented painters to attend ACPA. His growth is a testament to the transformational impact that the right mentor and the right school can have on the trajectory of a young person's life.

Seeing Avante's incredible work today, it's hard to imagine that the ACPA senior started at an elementary school that didn't even have art classes. It wasn't until Avante attended a middle school with an enthusiastic art teacher that he began to explore his creative potential. That art teacher saw a spark in Avante, and she encouraged him to continue developing his creativity in an afterschool program at Transit Arts, a Columbus-based nonprofit organization. Avante started in Transit Arts' dance program but quickly lost interest. "I really didn't like the class, so I wandered upstairs into the art studio to check out what else was going on." It was there that he met Duarte Brown, the community artist, teacher, and mentor who Avante now says "is like a grandpa to me."

Like he's done with so many over the years, Duarte took a genuine interest in Avante, both as an emerging artist and as a young man. "My goal is to use the arts

to make relationships with kids and build a family environment," said Duarte. Not only did he get Avante interested in rigorous art classes, but he also listened to Avante and got to know him over long conversations after class. "Kids don't care about you until they know that you care about them," said Duarte.

Over the next few years, Duarte helped Avante develop into a talented artist and a more confident, self-possessed young man. Under Duarte's tutelage at Transit Arts, Avante spent as much time painting after school as he could, sometimes for three hours at a time. But Duarte also saw Avante begin to struggle as a freshman in his large district high school.

Though middle school had gone well for Avante, especially after he found Transit Arts, life at a comprehensive high school was much more challenging. "It was fun to hang with my friends from middle school, but there was way too much drama." Avante was especially distressed by the frequent fights. "They would start first thing in the morning and break out all day." Avante was mostly able to avoid conflict and stuck to his small group of friends. But being in a physically and verbally violent environment day after day, being on edge from the moment he arrived at school until he was able to retreat to the sanctuary offered by Transit Arts, began to take a toll on Avante. It was clear that he needed a new environment. One afternoon, staff from ACPA visited the studio. Avante was excited at the idea of a school where he could spend hours every day working on art pieces. He also loved the idea of going from a school where he was seen as "that weird art kid" to a place where he would be surrounded by other students who were also working hard to create well-made art.

It turned out Duarte had a long relationship with ACPA, helping the school recruit students and painting one of the murals that line the school's main hallway. When Duarte took Avante for a school visit, Avante was amazed. "A senior took me on a tour and the school seemed so free and open. The kids there didn't seem to have to worry," says Avante. Duarte helped him complete the enrollment paperwork, even though there weren't any openings at the time. "I was willing to wait," said Avante. Fortunately, a space opened up over the summer, and Avante was ready to take his next step.



“Art is the true conductor of safe space.”

— GG HOWARD

Brooke Hunter-Lombardi helps a student with a technical element in a series of small ceramic sculptures she is creating.

A Safe Space to Create

The idea of safe space was fundamental to the founding vision of ACPA. GG Howard, a former art teacher in the Columbus School District, was inspired to open the school by her daughter’s struggle to find her way in a suburban district high school. Although comprehensive high schools work for many students, all too often, teens who don’t fit in can have a difficult time. GG heard about the opportunity to start a different type of high school—a charter public school—where she would have the freedom to build the type of school culture that made all students feel welcomed. “I wanted a school where my daughter would feel safe,” said GG.

As an arts educator, GG knew the arts would be essential for building the type of high school she envisioned. “Art is the true conductor of safe space,” said GG. Through the arts, ACPA students would be encouraged to “explore who they are, encouraged to try and fail as they grow and create.” GG understood that “we are trying on different versions of ourselves as we grow into adulthood.” Ironically, ACPA opened in 2002, the year GG’s daughter graduated from high school.

While GG’s daughter wasn’t able to attend ACPA, more than 1,200 others have. Ohio has other high-quality arts high schools, but ACPA is unique in its commitment to creating a “radically safe space” for their students to grow into compassionate adults and accomplished artists. “Our founding vision for ACPA

was that we had to be kind to one another and expect people to be kind back to us,” said GG. In addition to artistically minded students across the Columbus area, ACPA also draws students who struggled to fit in at their traditional middle schools. The diversity of students’ race, economic background, sexual identity, gender fluidity, or unique interests are not only tolerated but celebrated. This commitment is seen in small ways throughout the school, in the way students treat one another and the confidence with which they express themselves in hundreds of unique ways. You also see it in larger ways, like the school’s annual drag show and the ease with which ACPA’s students can have a frank and open schoolwide discussion about race that would be difficult, if not impossible, at most high schools.

The rigorous arts program has made the high school a beacon for creative students across the Columbus area. As you walk through the halls, the school is imbued with artistic expression, from the tentative strumming of guitars coming from an intro music class to the confident cacophony bursting from a practice room as a group of older students works through a complex section of a song they’ve composed. You see it in the dim light and hushed conversations in the visual arts studio and drama students enthusiastically singing their way down the hall toward the school’s black box theatre. ACPA offers a full array of arts classes—from introductory

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— BEN SHINABERY

levels to Advanced Placement—in painting, instrumental and vocal music, dance, theater, ceramics, fashion design, recording, and digital media. On a recent visit, students were eager to show off a new virtual reality system that lets them create simulations of massive sculptures. The school is also exploring the addition of a culinary arts program. “We put them in creative spaces and let them explore,” said Brooke Hunter-Lombardi, one of ACPA’s painting teachers and the parent of an ACPA student. The school also provides rigorous college-prep courses to prepare their students to excel academically as well as artistically.

Over the past seventeen years, ACPA has drawn students from twenty-five different school districts. “A lot of our students faced some pretty severe bullying in their middle schools for how they dressed or who they loved,” said Ben Shinabery, ACPA’s Director of Development. Ben said ACPA being a school of choice has been critical to achieving the safe space that GG first envisioned. “Our climate and culture are sustained year after year because students are choosing to come to ACPA. They’re seeking us out because there’s no other school in the area who offers what we offer.” Ben draws a direct link with ACPA’s school environment to academic success. “When kids don’t have to spend time on bullying, teasing, or fighting, they can relax and focus on their work.” Students have thrived in that safe space, earning ACPA the distinction of being one of Ohio’s top-performing charter public schools the past seven years.

ACPA is able to maintain their unique environment because their work is rooted in a set of core values. While many organizations have values, too often they only exist in a dusty binder with their last strategic plan. Over the years, ACPA’s founding principle of being kind has developed into a more specific set of values—kindness, respect for diversity, honesty, problem-solving, participation, awareness, and communication—that define expectations for students,

teachers, and administrators alike. The values are displayed in every classroom and called out on the morning announcements as teachers recognize students who have demonstrated them. The values are also at the center of ACPA’s curriculum, especially their arts curriculum. “All throughout the year, our teachers are asking our students to use dance, drama, or visual arts to interpret our values,” said Ben. That integration even extends into academic subjects. When asked if he uses the values in his daily instruction, math teacher Aaron Wagner is quick to reply. “Oh yeah. Problem-solving, communication, participation—they’re all critical to math.” Aaron also makes frequent use of the list of values displayed in his classroom. “Whenever I see kids doing something that doesn’t align with values, I take a moment, point to the value on the wall, and we have a conversation with the class about it.”

Almost twenty years in, it would be understandable for ACPA’s leaders to be satisfied in running one of Ohio’s most exceptional high schools. But over the years, they heard from family after family who wished they had found ACPA sooner. “Middle school can be brutal,” said Ben, “and a lot of times it takes our students over a year to get over their trauma from that experience. So many kids become a completely different person when they don’t have to worry about their safety.” To provide more students with a school environment built on kindness, ACPA set out to expand. After two years of planning and with the Ohio School Facilities Commission providing \$1.9 million of the \$4.6 million in construction costs,



on August 16, 2019, ACPA cut the ribbon on a 20,000-square-foot expansion. Not only does the additional space provide classrooms and collaborative learning spaces for their new middle schoolers, but it also has an expanded cafeteria that, most excitingly for an arts high school, doubles as a large auditorium and performance space.

New Challenges

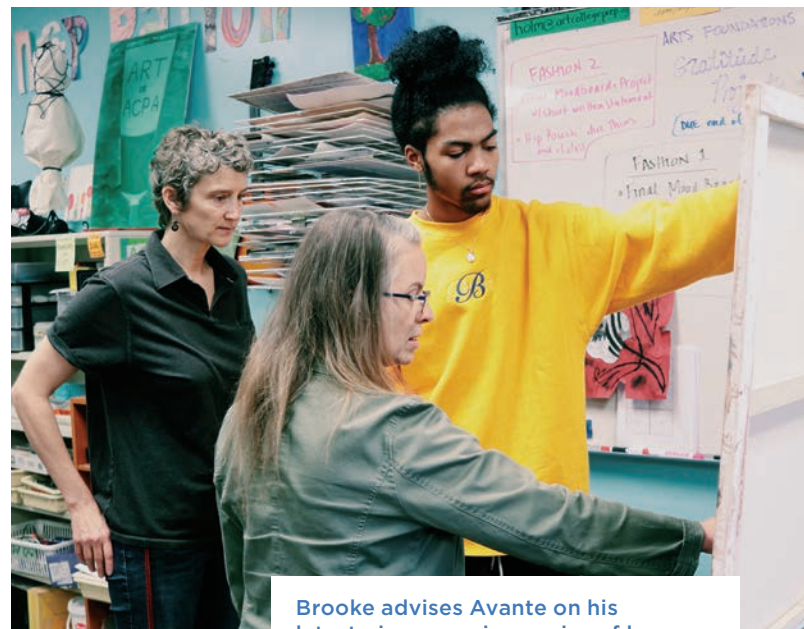
Avante's talent is undeniable, but his teachers are all quick to tell you how hard he has worked to develop that talent. His painting teacher Brooke Hunter-Lombardi remembers frequent times when she and Avante butted heads. Avante was gifted and had a strong work ethic but struggled with the foundational principles of painting that Brooke emphasizes. "Young artists can get discouraged with their own inconsistency, so we spend a lot of time building those skills." He was also impatient with her emphasis on each element of the creative process, not just the finished piece. "He was especially reluctant to talk about his work and the work of others, but that's fundamental to the creative process," said Brooke. "I pulled him aside one day and said, 'You're going to have to talk!'"

Since then, Brooke has seen Avante not just develop into an accomplished young artist but also a leader. "I take less credit for teaching him how to paint and more credit for teaching him how to be himself in a space." Avante still spends hours in the studio working on his own pieces, but he is always interested in what other students are working on and eager to offer help or advice. "He's grown so much, from not knowing his place to a sponge soaking up whatever we throw at him—and now to a mentor who is so supportive of other students." Brooke also credits the school culture for Avante's progress, especially the sense of freedom that impressed him on his first tour. "Students at ACPA know they have the freedom to explore, to fail, and to grow."

For the mentor who introduced Avante to ACPA and brought him on his first school visit, his artistic growth is a point of pride. Duarte often brings his

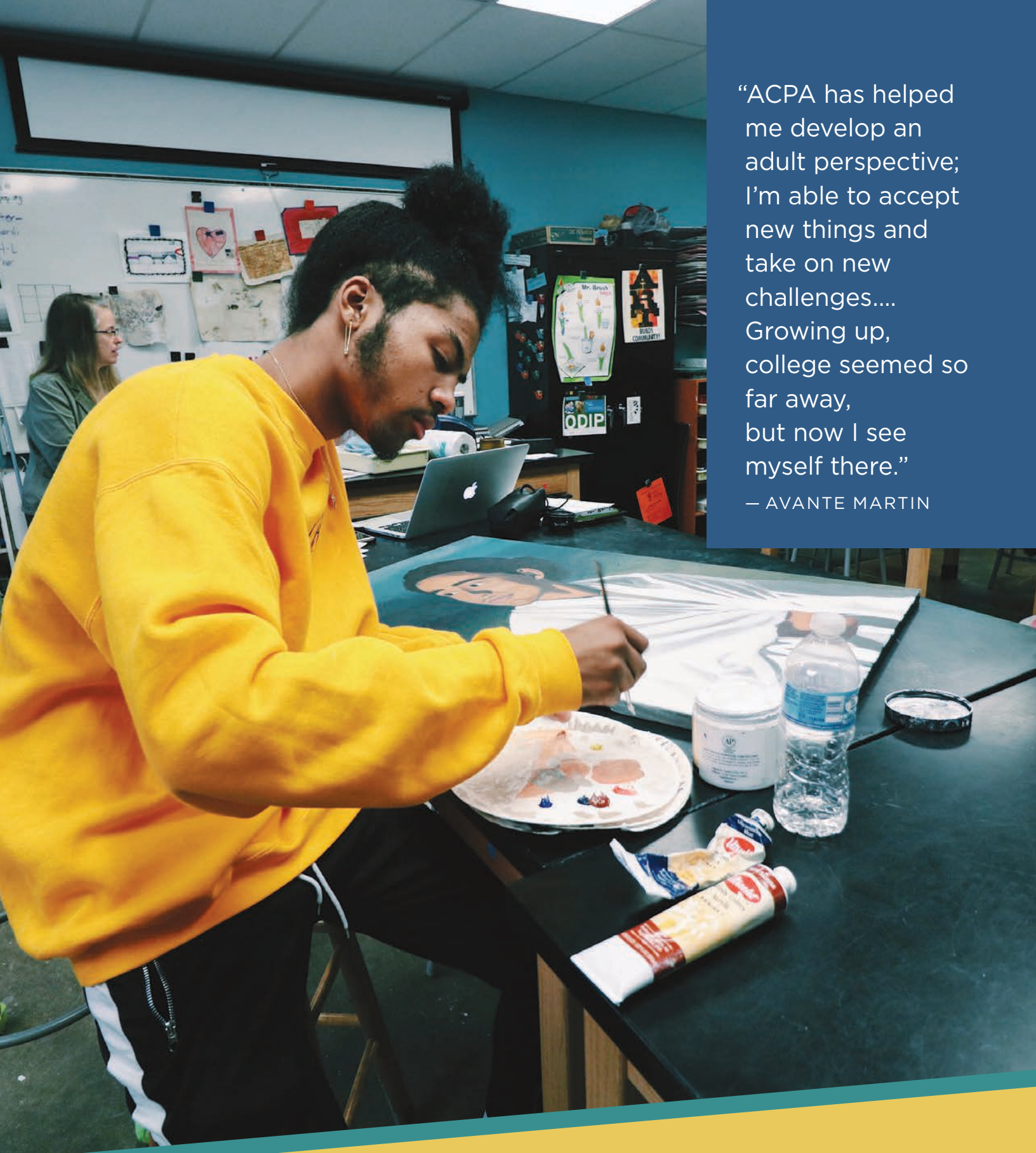
protégé to painting classes with other high schoolers. "I don't have to say anything; they see how focused he is, how hard he works, the quality of his art, and they understand what it takes to do this well." But Duarte is most impressed with Avante's personal growth. "He is very compassionate. He's sensitive and has a passion for people," said Duarte, "even if he hides it sometimes." Avante has grown into an inspiration for his mentor: "He challenges me to keep thinking young, like a dreamer, and to always be hopeful."

For Avante, being in an environment that is "big on open-mindedness" has expanded his horizons. "ACPA has helped me develop an adult perspective; I'm able to accept new things and take on new challenges." The structure and planning processes that Duarte, Brooke, and others spent so much time



Brooke advises Avante on his latest piece: one in a series of large portraits he's been creating.

helping him develop through his art is also helping him plan the next steps in his life. He's looking at art schools, but he is also carefully considering how he will pay for not just tuition but other associated expenses, as well. "Growing up, college seemed so far away, but now I see myself there." Avante's outlook and his art are powerful testaments to how a caring mentor and an excellent school of choice can open a world of possibilities for a talented young man.



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— AVANTE MARTIN