

## Where the Vans Go:



# Mari's Place for the Arts

Sep 29, 2022

<https://www.communitytransit.org/news/blog/>



Whether it's penning a poem, painting a masterpiece, strumming the guitar, or self-expression through dance, Mari's Place for the Arts has been nurturing creativity and confidence in children and teens in the Everett area since 2010. Mari's Place for the Arts provides local youth an opportunity to explore their creative side through art and cultural enrichment classes.

In 2010, Founder Mary Toews saw a need in her community that she was determined to meet. "There were no affordable or free arts programs for children. Childhood is when you're discovering who you are — and the arts are a big part of that," she says.

For Toews, bringing these programs to her community is a passion.

"I went to Mexico, sold everything I own there and used that money to start my organization here. I want to, in some way, pay back the community for what they have given me for years," she says. Her mission? "A world where every child has access to quality artistic and cultural education programs."

"All children should have the chance to explore the arts and find their talents," she says. "We give the opportunity to anyone who needs it. Children are planting the seeds of who they will become. We want to help them grow."

Her nonprofit was awarded a 12-passenger van in 2022 through Community Transit's Van GO program. The vehicle has quickly become a vital tool in the services Mari's Place provides.

Vans reaching the end of their service life with Community Transit's Vanpool shared commute program can get a second chance to make a difference in the community by being awarded to local nonprofit organizations. Community Transit's Van GO competitive grant program launched in 2000 and has since awarded 158 vans

and wheelchair lift-equipped paratransit vehicles to qualified 501(c)3 organizations throughout Snohomish County. In 2021, 42 nonprofit groups submitted applications. Recipients were chosen based on how they proposed to use the vehicles to serve their communities.

"I was using my own car before — the engine is tired," she says. "The van is a blessing because I can transport the kids — take them swimming, camping, to a presentation, to an art museum, a symphony, the opera, an exhibition — everywhere. I can fit an entire class in the van!"



All of her classes are small — no more than 12 students in each class. Students attend a one-hour class each week over a six-week period.

"Small groups give a quality experience for the children," she says. "When people go to graduate school, the groups are small for a reason. In

smaller groups, people know your name. They get to know your talents, to know what you want to develop," she says.

Small groups also help her tailor each class to what her students are excited about.

"We don't choose what we teach for the children, we allow the children to choose. I tell my students 'You are different. you are unique!' And that's why we open the doors for you here — to let you come and share your talents. If you like to write, and want to write a book, tell a poem — tell us what you want to do and we can make it happen for you. We can guide you in whatever you want to be."

Toews says she's seen more and more parents looking for resources for their kids.

"We went from serving 400 to 500 kids each year to more than 1,000 through online classes during the year of the pandemic," she says.

Yet even as demand grows, Toews has found a way to serve more students.

"We have a small space and I am the only staff person," she says. But just one person has made quite the impact. The website features an entire gallery of colorful portraits of Toews, lovingly drawn and painted by her students.

"One thing I want to say — I am Mexican. I am Latina. People like to divide us — by color, gender, or place we come from — but I want to serve everyone. I have heard people say that my organization is 'only for Latinos.' I want this to be a place where everyone is welcome. It's important for the kids to experience that."

Toews also says she is thankful for the volunteers, donations, and grants that have helped her do the work she does every day. "Imagine if everyone just gave a little bit of what they receive to their community. What a beautiful world it would be!"

Community Transit plans to grant more vehicles to local nonprofit organizations later this year. Do you know of a local organization doing important work in our community? Share this opportunity with them so they can apply when we begin taking applications. Visit [communitytransit.org/vango](https://www.communitytransit.org/vango) to learn more.