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Former Salem teacher launches art gallery to fund charity

By Alan Burke
Staff Writer

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SALEM — Katherine Montero knows the problems faced by urban kids. She can rattle them off: too many single moms, too many drugs, too many opportunities missed.

"I grew up in the Point neighborhood," she explains.

A native of the Dominican Republic, she came to Salem at age 13 but managed to avoid the pitfalls that entrap so many newcomers. Rather, she thrived.

A graduate of Salem High School and Salem State, Montero worked later as a science teacher in her old high school. She went on to earn a graduate degree from Harvard University, to manage a lab at the Harvard Medical School and, eventually, to establish herself as a consultant specializing in business and product development.

In other words, she went a long way to become a success.

Now in her early 30s, Montero found she needed more.

"I felt empty that I wasn't doing something for my former students," she said.

She began "brainstorming" with friends and colleagues about ways to make positive changes, and the result in 2005 was the Global Deeds Foundation, an organization aimed, first, at places like Salem, Lawrence and Boston. Eventually, Montero hopes it could have a worldwide impact.

"We are going to make tremendous changes down the road," she said, confidently.

Now a Peabody resident, Montero said the first step is raising money. So far, she takes no salary herself and hopes to earn the foundation a half-million dollars with a variety of sources, including an art gallery in the old bookstore at 45 Lafayette St.

Early projects were efforts to bring relief supplies to the Dominican Republic in the aftermath of Hurricane Noel in 2007 and to Haiti following the earthquake. But her long-term goal is different.

"Education is by far our main focus," she said.

She wants to provide scholarships aimed at teens who show the kind of drive and ability that will make such an investment count. Montero hopes to channel them into one of five fields: education, health, disaster relief, environment, or social advocacy.

"We want them to become social entrepreneurs, people who are highly driven to accomplish all these things," she

said. "And maybe one day they can go back to their communities, and they can give back.

Montero has opened the Artropoly gallery with the sponsorship of the New York and Miami-based Art Rev Studios and local supporters, including Salem Home Depot, RCG Real Estate, the Howling Wolf Taqueria and McCurdy Electric. The gallery, open Wednesday through Sunday, displays artwork created by artists, including film star Anthony Quinn (a work donated by his widow), Romero Britto and Guillo Perez.

Local teens are also producing some of the art.

The gallery is planning a post-Christmas auction on Thursday, Dec. 29, at 7 p.m. and hoping others will drop in before Christmas for unique gifts to help a good cause.

Not all the donations should be monetary.

"We need a lot of help," said Montero, who seeks people to donate time for tasks including running the gallery or applying for grants.

It will be "art with a mission," Montero said, helping to bring social change that can be as small as connecting kids to useful activities.

"They often have nothing to do after school, and maybe they are not aware of what's available to them," she said.