

### **Pitt Student Reaches Out to Young Art Community**

Two flights up the building at 937 Liberty Avenue, Kait Wittig is overseeing a large Velcro gluing operation. 350 strips of Velcro must be pasted to 350 pictures of Pittsburgh landmarks which will eventually be attached to the 350 pieces of Velcro already stuck on the wall. The glue is running out.

“Oh no, we need to get this done today,” she says. Calmly she takes out her cell phone as she walks to the far wall of the studio and behind a black curtain. Muffled frantic yelps are briefly heard. She returns.

“Okay, we’re getting more glue soon,” she says, smiling wearily. “Within the next hour or so.”

Wittig, 22, is curating for the second time her own art show, 30 Below, for the Artists Upstairs gallery. This, on top of a full class load and 15 hours a week working on plays as a theater major at Pitt, is beginning to wear her down.

“I’m just a little tired, that’s all,” she says. When spoken to she’s automatically polite and attentive, willing to answer any questions or help anyone with anything. But when she thinks no one’s looking she’s staring off with a blank expression. Her mouth is slightly open and her eyelids creep slowly closed only to be periodically opened up, wider than before.

Things have been tiring in general for Kait these last few years. A teenage

cancer survivor, she obtained her GED after going into remission at 18, and at 19 began attending classes at Westmoreland County Community College in Greensburg, where her family lives. She was soon accepted at Pitt Greensburg, where she met a theater professor, Tavia La Follette, who was to become a mentor of sorts.

“Tavia really helped me find out who I was, I guess,” said Kait. “Her autobiographical monologue class was the first one that really struck me. She gave me a lot of support and encouragement, although I guess I did have interesting stories to tell.”

La Follette’s class, Kait says, was what convinced her to make the decision to become a theater major.

“I’d always wanted to be involved with theater; it was always my dream, I guess,” she said. “But I was never sure about it. I was worried I wouldn’t make anything of myself and that I wouldn’t be able to do anything interesting. Tavia’s work in theater, with all the props and puppets and everything, made me realize that there were still lots of things that I hadn’t seen in a play and made me want to create something that people hadn’t seen before.”

When La Follette created the Artists Upstairs collective in 2004, Kait was brought along to help. “I was basically Tavia’s assistant,” she said. “I would take phone calls, basically deal with all the busy work.”

Kait quickly rose to the ill-defined high level position she currently holds. “Now I get to go to all the meetings and have a real say in what goes on,” she said.

During this time Kait transferred to Pitt and became something of a

celebrity in the theater department. She's directed two small stage productions (along with the two she directed for Art Up), assistant directed a main stage play and has done various tech work and acting in countless others. She even, with the backing of the theater department, ran and lost and underdog campaign for 2007 homecoming queen.

"Kait's a real work horse," said Emily Fear, 23, an Art Up associate and Kait's co-curator for the upcoming art event. "I don't know how she does it. When I was still in college I thought I was busy, but I could never do the amount of stuff she does and still have classes. She told me she never sleeps."

"I do *so* sleep!" said Kait, sipping a giant thermos full of coffee. "I meant that in the figurative sense. As in I just barely sleep. I get at least four hours a night. There's just so much I want to do. I might get angry and frustrated with things, but I wouldn't sacrifice any of the things I'm involved in for more sleep... well honestly, I'd rather not be taking these GEN ED requirements, but that's what I have to do to graduate."

30 Below, meanwhile, is Kait's pet project. The first one, held in August of this year, was a measured success. "Oh jeez, well that took almost a full year just to get going," said Kait. "Tavia came up with the idea of me curating a gallery event in September of '06. I think it was just because she had no time but needed something to fill the gallery for a while."

The two women developed a grant proposal for Kait's new project, which would feature exclusively the work of local artists under the age of 30.

"The grant proposal failed," said Kait. "They wouldn't give us the money. But since I had put all this time and resources into getting the proposal prepared, I couldn't let go of it."

“Less people showed up than I would have liked,” she continued. “But my main concern was helping to create a stronger network of young artists in Pittsburgh. So many are leaving because they think there’s nothing here. I think we did do that, at least.”

“I thought the first 30 Below was great,” said Erik Harker, 22, a Pitt student who does busy work for Art Up from time to time. “There was a DJ playing good music, which is unusual for the galleries around here. I saw a lot of good stuff, and some of them [the artists] were just in high school. It was pretty impressive. I particularly remember this set of photographs of Pittsburgh landscapes what really pointed out the geometric shapes you can find in the city.”

The same artist who took those photographs, James Wong, is now busy installing a piece in the gallery for the next 30 Below, to be held on New Years Eve as part of the First Night festivities.

“I think that this particular piece might make some people uncomfortable,” said Kait, giddily looking at the beginnings of a work that will eventually contain several homemade religious altars. “There’s going to be families in here, and it’s a religious time of the year, and I think religious imagery in that context can be controversial. I really hope it is.”

Kait Wittig looks up, scratches her chin and bites her lower lip, clearly relishing the prospect of subversion. Then she turns and sprints back behind the curtain, and back to work.