



Macpherson and students show off their unique take on the family portrait.

# PUTTING ART WITHIN REACH

Kevin Macpherson and his ambassadors have made it their mission to introduce art to children and communities in areas of the world where it's hard to find, and needed most.

— BY STEFANIE LAUFERSWEILER —

Art is one of the first things to leave curriculum, yet it's one of the few things that survives throughout cultures," says renowned plein air artist Kevin Macpherson. The nonprofit he started, Art Ambassador for a Colorful World (AAFCW), is his impassioned effort to combine his love of painting and travel with the chance to make a greater impact by bringing art to underprivileged children, and helping their communities see how art has the power to improve every life.

With the help of a small team at AAFCW and the partnerships he's made with schools and other nonprofit groups such as

*"Some of the greatest opportunities begin in the most unexpected places. Art has no borders. And art education allows one to dream in color," says Macpherson, shown here with some of his young pupils on an AAFCW trip.*





*"My classes may have 20 children or so, but on this occasion I had 500 throughout the day — the whole school, including the teachers, painting on a 30-meter canvas roll. It was wild," says Macpherson. On one side, the girls painted shapes in beautiful colors, while the boys on the other side reveled in finding the artist's stash of black paint. He let each group do their own thing. "There are times to teach art and other times to explore and let go," he says. "I find much of art instruction can fan the flames of passion or snuff it out forever."*

Xela AID — which serves Mayan children and families struggling to survive in the Guatemalan Highlands — Macpherson organizes 10-day painting trips that offer sightseeing and art-making alongside himself and other professional artists. The unique experience includes visiting nearby villages for volunteer projects that involve giving kids unforgettable painting opportunities, at schools where time and resources for making art are scarce, if not nonexistent.

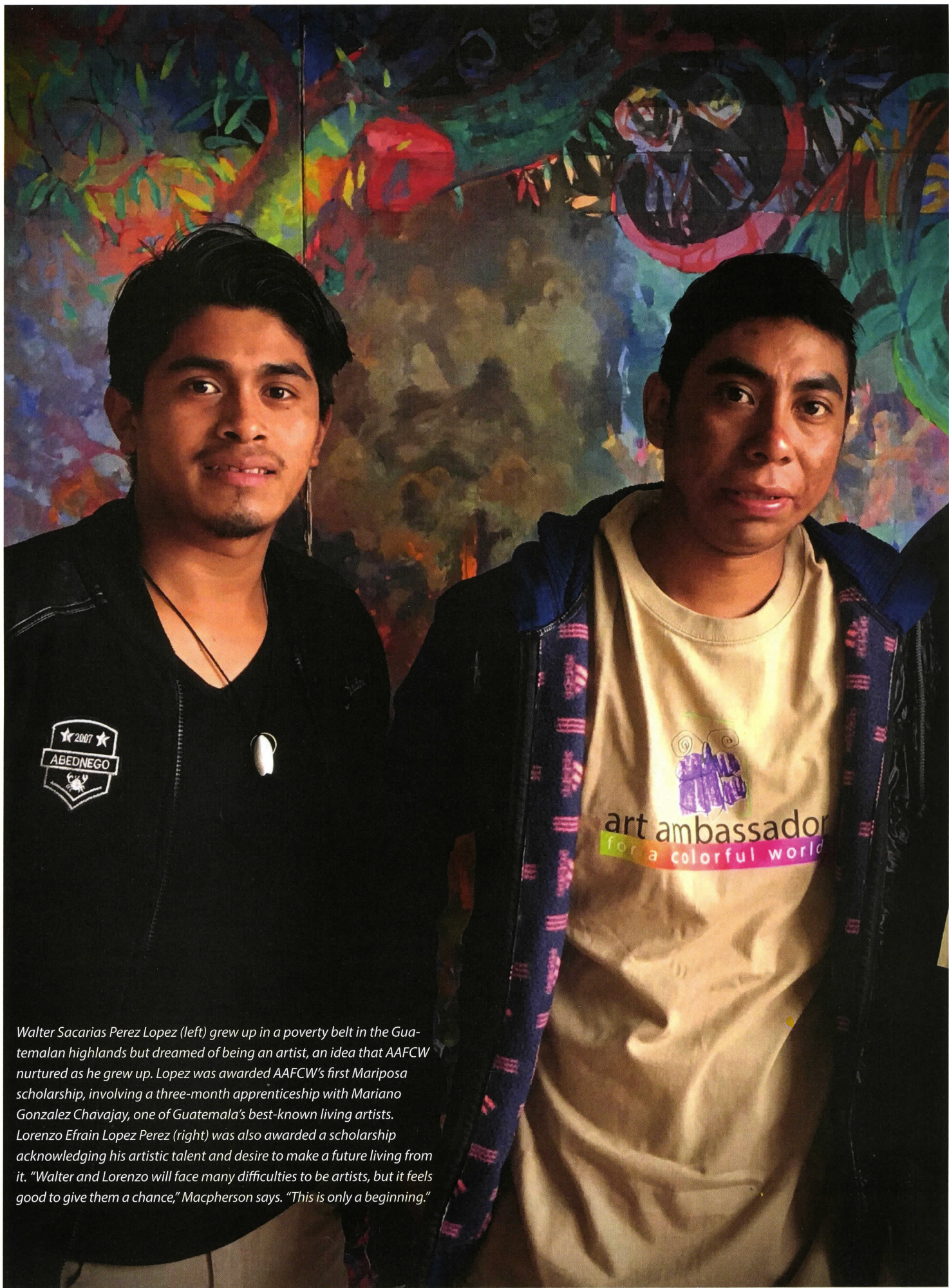
These "artist painting adventures," as Macpherson calls them, give others a taste of the service activities he's engaged in since 2011, bringing hands-on art instruction to thousands of children in China, Guatemala, and Mexico, with plans to expand AAFCW's outreach to other areas in Southeast Asia, Central America, and South America as well. "This taste often changes how an artist sees their painting and their gift that can go beyond just paint and canvas," he says.

## HOW IT BEGAN

Travel is a passion for Macpherson — he's been to more than 35 countries — but the first time he connected that with volunteering came after he watched a TV segment in his home in Taos, New Mexico, about a man in Shanghai who had created a nonprofit center for the children of



*Encouraging imagination, Macpherson says, is his main job when teaching children, especially where art supplies are hard to find. "I bring the kids outside to look for rocks that inspire them to see, be curious, and imagine what we can paint on them," he says. At one school that had barely a few crayons to share among the class, he took advantage of the bananas growing nearby. "I asked the farmer to chop a bundle for me and I dragged it nearly a mile to the school," he says. "When I was young, I loved to inscribe bananas with drawings and secret messages for my mom to find later. So, on this day, my students and I had a wild time creating on bananas."*



Walter Sacarias Perez Lopez (left) grew up in a poverty belt in the Guatemalan highlands but dreamed of being an artist, an idea that AAFCW nurtured as he grew up. Lopez was awarded AAFCW's first Mariposa scholarship, involving a three-month apprenticeship with Mariano Gonzalez Chavajay, one of Guatemala's best-known living artists. Lorenzo Efrain Lopez Perez (right) was also awarded a scholarship acknowledging his artistic talent and desire to make a future living from it. "Walter and Lorenzo will face many difficulties to be artists, but it feels good to give them a chance," Macpherson says. "This is only a beginning."



*"Painting portraits is a great way to truly get to know someone as we talk about their life," says Macpherson, shown here with students in Xishuangbanna, a region of China. After a visit from him and fellow artist Barry Raybould, the school there created a dedicated art studio, filled with easels and painting supplies donated by the pair through AAFCW. "Every day, the little girl I painted in this portrait would spend her own money and bring me a popsicle," he says.*

migrant workers coming from other provinces. "The children didn't have access to the same after-school activities as the local children, so he offered music to them," Macpherson says. "I really felt a connection with that. So I found a way to contact him by e-mail and said, 'I know nothing about music, but I can offer art to your children.' He said, 'Come on over!'"

A few months later, Macpherson was painting with 20 children along the Bund waterfront in Shanghai. That experience led to others, and sometimes a bit of creative thinking along the

way. "It's very difficult to go to a foreign country and try to do something without ground organizers; there are lots of government necessities," he says. "But we can easily add an 'extra' to a variety of other organizations. For instance, doctor missions often have hundreds of people needing care, and art activities can add to the program while they wait."

Macpherson has primarily self-funded his projects with the children, but was inspired enough by individuals he's met and collaborated with to set up his own nonprofit. "Art Ambassador for a Colorful World just evolved out of things I was doing," he says of the organization that became official in June 2014. "With the help of my wife, Wanda, and a few dear friends and students, we formed a board together, and away we went." AAFCW director Ruth Heffron says that although they're a small nonprofit, they'd like to "go further" and develop online curriculums and instructional videos for young people they meet who'd like to pursue an art career. Through its partnership with Xela AID, AAFCW plans to

grow its presence in Guatemala by developing a plain air studio on top of Xela AID's new three-story Center for Learning Innovation, which houses more classroom space and guest rooms for volunteers.

## LEARNING WHILE TEACHING

Although Macpherson has spent three decades instructing adults in how to paint, he's never had any formal training in teaching, especially children. "But I think that is an advantage," he says. "I wing it! Once, I found a pile of white gloves in a shop, so I asked the children to create their family on each finger along with any dogs, cows, and chickens in their home. I think kids instantly enjoy my classes because I'm silly and it's a relief from their regular strict teachers."

Macpherson's classes are typically arranged by the hosting school, which borrows one of the classrooms that may normally be used for math or another subject. "The classes aren't long, often barely an hour, so it's a hectic time," he says. "They may tell me I'll have 35 kids, but what



*"We all wonder if one person can make a difference, but the smiles and joy you see in these kids' eyes is worth it for me," Macpherson says of the students he's had. And every painter, at any time, has that opportunity. "Let a child join you on your next plein air outing," he says. "Let them witness your joy and enthusiasm appreciating something as simple as the light on a tree. Give them paper and paint — no instructions — and just let them go. My guess is you'll be impressed, and you may learn some things from them."*

*"On my last morning at a village school in Wenshan [in the Yunnan province of China], I opened my dorm room to find an offering of handmade presents for me. The children then greeted me with tears in their eyes," he says. "In the short time I shared my love of art with them, I made a lasting impression and a real connection. We are all born with a gift; sharing our gifts brings many more presents back to us."*





Lori Putnam's first trip through AAFCW in 2018 was life-changing. "It was my first real chance to use art as a way to give hope and help mend a small, broken community in Guatemala," she says. Putnam became vice president of AAFCW in 2019 and she sponsors one of the children she met, something a number of participating artists decide to do.

often happens is the other students get wind that 'teacher Kevin' is here, and all of a sudden my class fills to 90."

One of the biggest challenges of teaching art in faraway rural locations, Macpherson says, is getting supplies. During one trip to a remote area of China, he had to get creative while teaching at Long Lin elementary school in Xishuangbanna, about 30 miles north of the Laos border. "When I first arrived, I saw that it had one outside earth toilet for the 250 children that boarded there," he says. "You can imagine there was probably not a Dick Blick nearby! So, with my very rudimentary ability to speak Chinese, I'd go in any shop I could find and imagine what I could use to make art with." Some ping pong paddles he found were a big hit: "We painted portraits of their buddies on them."

The students at Long Lin range from 7 to 11 years old and live in the mountains a few hours away, along dirt roads in slat wood houses. "On the weekends they go back home, but during the week they all live at the school. The teachers care for them, and the children watch out for one another," Macpherson says. "They wear the same outfit for the week." He visited one of their mountain villages and was welcomed warmly with gifts of mangos, fresh nuts, and local vegetables. The artist has returned to the school multiple times over the course of seven years. "The kids get excited when I arrive," he says. "It's fun for me to see how they grow up; the older ones all want me to visit their middle school in the bigger town."

He quickly discovered that making art together eases the language barrier (though he's

diligently studying Mandarin) and any uncertainties. "On my first trips alone to China, I arrived not knowing anyone, not speaking or reading a word of Chinese, and not painting portraits," says Macpherson, who is best known artistically for his impressionistic landscapes. "Children and teachers helped me as I painted them," he says. "What better way to learn a language? And what better way to find oneself as an artist — trying everything new, without expectations from others or, more importantly, oneself?"

## BENEFITS FOR ALL

Macpherson believes that what he and other artists do on their trips is less about teaching specifics and more about nurturing creative spirit. "I believe all children are artists until adults tell them they are not," he says. "Quickly, society stamps out the curious wonder in children. I don't teach them art, but I give them opportunities to be creative."

He also encourages the adults in the places they visit to embrace their own creativity, especially in the time-honored local crafts that will disappear unless they pass down their skills. Macpherson mentions the beautiful, painstakingly detailed weavings made by the Mayan women he's met. "If we can encourage and help create marketing for their crafts, it not only helps them have a livelihood, but we don't lose this art form," he says. Some agree to model for the artists on the trip. "They live a hard life — many of them do not smile," he says. "But after we paint them, some have said they feel better about themselves because we see the strength and beauty they did not even see themselves."

The experiences Macpherson has had through AAFCW have not only benefitted many schools, other artists, and the organizations he's partnered with, but have kept him on the edge of his comfort zone — exactly where he wants to be. "Putting myself in foreign environments and situations keeps me alive," he says. "My mission is to get the community involved — to show them that art is an important aspect of our lives. Creativity can improve our lives and our thought process no matter where we live, what career we choose, or what our circumstances are." 📷

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**For more on Art Ambassador for a Colorful World and to find out how you can register for upcoming trips, make a donation, or subscribe to their newsletter, visit [artambassador.org](http://artambassador.org).**