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# Kids

Time Out Chicago / Issue 80: Sept 7–Sept 13, 2006

## Online and off the fridge

**Artsonia.com** gives kids a worldwide audience for their art, and parents a chance to clear the clutter.

By Judy Sutton Taylor

When Jim Meyers and Kishore Swaminathan noticed a co-worker's cubicle wallpapered with his child's artwork, they had a collective "ah-ha" moment. The two, then executives at the Chicago offices of consulting and tech firm Accenture, knew there had to be a better way to display the ongoing stream of little masterpieces that clutter countless office walls and fridge doors.



LATE NIGHT BITE An Artsonia artist's take on Edward Hopper's *Nighthawks*.

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That moment resulted in the pair launching Artsonia ([www.artsonia.com](http://www.artsonia.com)), a virtual children's art gallery where teachers and parents can upload their kids' work for free. But they had bigger goals than creating just an electronic warehouse. The website also provides art teachers with ideas for lesson plans and class projects, and gives them a means to engage students in virtual "field trips" to view art created by kids from around the world. More than 1 million pieces by kids from 108 countries have been published on the site.

Artsonia gives parents a means to share their children's artwork with friends and relatives who live far away, too. Visitors can join a child's fan club and leave comments in his or her guest book, and they can purchase everything from coffee mugs to greeting cards emblazoned with a favorite image. Artsonia donates 15 percent of every purchase to that artist's school, providing an ongoing means of fund-raising for needy art projects.

"It's a way for families to be actively involved [in fund-raising] on a continual basis," says Tiffany Rahn, Artsonia's education director. "They have more than just a two-week window to purchase pizzas to benefit the school."

"I had one parent bring her whole office to help photograph and upload one day," says Mary Ellen Ziegler, an art teacher at Murray Language Academy in Hyde Park. "They loved doing it and wanted the pictures in by a certain date to buy holiday gifts."

Artsonia occasionally partners with other groups and business for special online exhibits. It worked with Lions

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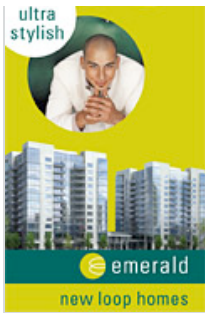
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Clubs International to run a peace poster contest, and recently held a linoleum block print contest with Dick Blick Art Materials.

New for this school year, the site has launched a virtual after-school kids club. Each month, Artsonia will suggest a topic, such as "Home Sweet Home," for projects to be considered for display in a new virtual "wing" of the gallery. Artsonia will select ten pieces each month to post on the exhibit pages, according to Rahn. The featured artists will receive awards in the form of art supplies. "It provides another way for parents to get more involved with art education," she says.

The Lincoln Park-based company will also soon offer free teleconference workshops for teachers. "We'll demonstrate how they can use our site for networking, getting lesson-plan ideas and fund-raising," Rahn says.

"Artsonia is a wonderful communication tool," says Tricia Fuglestad, an art teacher at Dryden Elementary School in Arlington Heights. "The opportunity for an authentic audience motivates my students ."

Fuglestad creates digital portfolios for kids to take with them once they leave the school. "Artsonia provides a way for students to witness their growth over time and have continuous access to their images," she says.

While anyone can view the artwork posted on the website, Artsonia takes steps to ensure online privacy and safety for its young artists. Children are given user names that include their first name followed by a computer-generated number ("sophie37") or, if there's a desire for less identifiable information, initials or even favorite animals are substituted. There's no way for website visitors to directly contact kids, and parents are provided with a security key that enables them to prescreen and approve comments left on their child's fan-club page. "We want parents and school boards to feel comfortable on our site," Rahn says.

For more information, visit [www.artsonia.com](http://www.artsonia.com).

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