

To&Through Student Stories



Meet Elizabeth

Elizabeth is a Black Ghanaian Chicago Artist who graduated from Jane Addams High School in 2019. She earned an Associate's Degree in Arts from Harold Washington College in 2023 and then graduated from DePaul University in 2026 as a first-generation college graduate. Growing up near Marquette Park, she spent countless afternoons sketching and drawing, building a love that would ultimately manifest in her career. She is currently working on a collaborative mural and pursuing educational assistantships at some of Chicago's most prominent arts centers.

Elementary School

Elizabeth attended Tarkington School of Excellence, where she met Miss Hoff, an art teacher who left a lasting impression. Miss Hoff quickly picked up on Elizabeth's passion and talent for drawing. She became a role model for Elizabeth, demonstrating what a career in arts education could look like. "I feel like she allowed me to direct my love for art and made me want to pursue it professionally—or just keep on pursuing it at least into high school and college."

Elizabeth notes, however, that her family was not initially supportive of her professional aspirations. Her father worried about how Elizabeth would be able to support herself financially.

In addition to art, Tarkington offered many after-school programs and resources. As such, Elizabeth explored a variety of activities, including band and fitness in the adjacent parks district.

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Toward her middle grade years, however, things slowed down for Elizabeth. Responding to her parents' divorce and some social difficulties, she began to struggle with her mental health. She explains: "I didn't really get to see my mom much, and I didn't get to see my siblings much—so that was really affecting me. I feel like in 8th grade, as I started to make friends and get involved in the community, things got better."

Community engagement—such as mutual aid cooking—would do more than improve Elizabeth's mental health. It would ultimately inform a rewarding way for Elizabeth to translate her art skills into an impact on the surrounding world.

High School

At Thomas Kelly College Preparatory High School (Kelly), Elizabeth furthered her proficiency in art with coursework and after-school activities. She also developed a strong love for jazz. She credits musicians Ella Fitzgerald and Blossom Dearie as role models, drawing from their distinct styles to inform her own creations.

Unfortunately, as troubles with her mental health resurfaced, Elizabeth began to feel less motivated about school. By senior year, she had missed so many days that graduating from Kelly seemed unlikely. As a result, she transferred to Jane Addams High School (Jane Addams), an alternative school that enabled her to complete her requirements and graduate on time.

Regarding life after high school, Elizabeth did not feel well-prepared: "I really didn't start thinking about it until like my second-to-last year. I wanted to go to an art school, but the school I wanted to go to was out of state. I just felt like I didn't really have the support system or finances to pursue out-of-state options."

Elizabeth mentioned that she did not feel comfortable enough to consult her high school advisors and counselors about her post-secondary goals. She also notes that, while her parents had each completed some of college, she did not feel they could—at that time—effectively guide her.

Conducting her own research through online sources, Elizabeth determined that attending a two-year institution would be a financially sound way of furthering her

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education. In 2019, after graduating from Jane Addams, she began studying at Harold Washington College community college.

College

It was while attending community college that Elizabeth solidified her career plans to pursue art education and become an art teacher. After reflecting on her love for art, she concluded that she “could not imagine doing anything else.” Her oil painting teacher encouraged her to continue studying at a four-year institution by reviewing schools with strong programs that offered financial aid. With the additional support of college counselors and faculty, Elizabeth began an application to DePaul University, where she soon matriculated.

At DePaul, Elizabeth specialized in animation. As coursework for digital cinematography is held at the university’s Loop campus, Elizabeth often felt somewhat isolated from her undergraduate peers. This, combined with the COVID-19 shutdown and being a transfer student, led to significant difficulties with building community.

“I feel like, as an artist, you will go and do your own little thing and then regroup. So, it was hard doing that. But I also worked at our I.R.L lab, which is a maker space lab. So I led art programs with other staff members, and I feel like that was an easy way for me to build a community.”

Having overcome these difficulties, Elizabeth managed to build a rewarding college experience. With time, her family became more supportive of her professional paths—especially after seeing her commitment to her studies.

In the spring of 2026, Elizabeth officially graduated from DePaul with a major in art. Integrating her love for community service and education, she sees herself as one day being a college or high school educator. Her hope is to guide students interested in the arts or liberal arts fields in a way that she never quite had.

What worked for Elizabeth

- **Guides and opportunities to cultivate her passion for art.** In elementary school, Miss Hoff helped Elizabeth envision herself as an artist. She inspired Elizabeth to

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continue to grow her art skills in high school and eventually to study art professionally in college. Throughout her time in high school and college, she had opportunities to develop her artistic skills. Those experiences helped propel Elizabeth into becoming an experienced Chicago artist.

- **A high school graduation pathway that accommodated her mental health.** In high school, Elizabeth was struggling with her mental health, which made her stop going to class for some time. When Elizabeth came back to school, she faced another obstacle. Given her absences, she said, “I would have to take another year in order to graduate from Kelly.” She then transferred to an alternative school, Jane Addams. There she found accommodations for her mental health leave and was able to graduate on time.

Elizabeth’s Hopes for the Field

For Schools

- **Allocate Funding More Efficiently** - Elizabeth says, “My high school was really underfunded, and I feel like we didn't really have a great support system.” She encourages CPS to be more cognizant of the disparities in funding across Chicago’s neighborhoods. Further financial backing can directly translate to further support and success for students.
- **Active Involvement** - Elizabeth wishes that, while she was overcoming mental health struggles, teachers had exhibited a deeper care for her well-being. She suggests that teachers try to keep an eye open for changes in behavior and sympathize with students who are going through tough times.

For Students

- **It’s OK to be Undecided** - Elizabeth assures students that they do not always have to know what their future holds. “It’s okay to figure things out,” she says. She looks back on her own time at community college fondly, remembering that those years prepared her well for DePaul and beyond.

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- **Build Community on Shared Interests** - Elizabeth shares that she's sometimes found building relationships to be difficult. Emphasizing that community is essential for mental health and beyond, she recommends that students locate others with similar interests or cultural backgrounds as themselves.