

The Kansas City Star

May 17, 2006
Section: News
Page: B1

'Sentence' Could be a Life Term **Students Perform, Display Their Creations**

JAMES HART

One day, Amira Wyatt is going to be a fashion designer. She has already made and sold some accessories, items such as beaded earrings, but the 17-year-old has ideas for entire clothing lines. She even knows what style of music - "underground" - will play in the boutique she wants to open.

It won't happen overnight, but Wyatt, who has overcome a tough childhood and a brush with the legal system, is on the path, at least, thanks to a Jackson County arts program.

Wyatt is just one of 700 Jackson County teens who are participating in the Sentenced to the Arts program, an initiative in which court-sentenced youths are placed in arts classes. The goal is to give teens from troubled backgrounds a positive creative outlet.

For Wyatt, that has meant a chance to paint and an internship at Chameleon, a nonprofit organization devoted to arts and youth development.

On Tuesday night, Wyatt and other students gathered at the Folly Theater in downtown Kansas City. The students with dance and music projects took to the stage while the aspiring painters and sculptors set up their art in the lobby.

Adriane Brown, 17, showed off two of her paintings. One - a landscape with a navy blue sky and rich green grass - was actually a kind of self-portrait, she said. The dark, crooked trees were the negative people in her life, and she was the shooting star.

Her other work was "X-ed and Z-ed," a painting of a boy turning into a monster. Brown illustrated the change with tempera on plexiglass. Over the monster's shoulder, Brown printed a poem she wrote.

"People don't take it seriously," said Brown, who wants to go into culinary arts as a career. "Oh, it's just art." For her, though, it has been a way to express her deepest feelings. And even when she's writing and painting about being angry or sad, the process makes her feel better.

Jackson County's COMBAT anti-drug program oversees Sentenced to the Arts and partly funds it. The bulk of the art program's \$250,000 budget comes from state sources.

This is Sentenced to the Arts' seventh year. Officials have done a handful of studies showing that participants are less likely to show up in the court system and are more likely to have higher self-esteem.

"If it didn't have benefits, we wouldn't be doing it," said Jim Nunnally, the COMBAT program administrator.

To reach James Hart, call (816) 234-4902 or send e-mail to jhart@kcstar.com.