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Sentenced to the Arts



She looks a lot like any other teen her age, with glittery eye shadow, perfectly coifed hair and low slung jeans. Looking

Tara (not her real name) holds some of the painting she has done under the Sentenced to the Arts program at Children's Art Institute.

Paul Beaver/The Examiner

at her, you would not think this is a youth who was in trouble. But, then again, you probably would not think this youth is a budding young artist.

As the old saying goes, it is hard to judge a book by its cover.

Tara, not her real name, is a sophomore at a local high school. Last year, she had a brush with the law that, ironically, brought her to a brush with the arts. Now, she spends most every night working at the Children's Arts Institute in Independence, pursuing her artistic inclinations in color and texture, and assisting with classes for younger children.

"I guess I would say that it has given me more options

and different points of view," she said of her work at the Institute. "You know, maybe I will be an interior designer or a field like that. I don't know for sure, but I definitely have options."



Students at the Drumm Alternative High School learn percussion skills in a rhythm therapy class that is also an outlet for the Sentenced to the Arts program.

Paul Beaver/The Examiner

Showing troubled youth the range of options available to them is exactly the point of the Sentenced to the Arts program that brought Tara from the courtroom to the studio.

The program matches adjudicated youth young people under order of the juvenile court system with artists in the community. The goal is to turn teens from a path of crime to a path of creativity.

"The kids that get in trouble, many times, are the ones who are the most creative," said Michael Toombs, artistic director for Storytellers, Inc., a coalition of local artists working with Sentenced to the Arts.

"What we do is allow them to see their creative options, so that if today they are in a very negative situation, then tomorrow maybe they can create something positive for themselves and those around them," Toombs said.

Toombs and his team of 30 artists worked with about 170 kids in the Sentenced to the Arts program last year, holding classes twice a week at McCune and Hilltop residential facilities and Drumm Farm Alternative School. At Christmas time, the artists did a special 10 day intensive program for youth being held at the Juvenile Justice Center while awaiting their court appearance.



Patrick Chapin, and instructor at Children's Art Institute shows artwork from a wire sculpture class of Sentenced to Arts students.

Paul Beaver/The Examiner

"Some of these kids are so angry and isolated, and they are scared about what is going to happen to them,"

Toombs said. "Art can let them express that in a positive way and the relationship they develop with the artist is just as important. Sometimes it is the first contact they have had where they are responded to as a human being."

Sentenced to the Arts is now beginning its second year of operation with grant funding through the U.S. Department of Justice. Last year, more than 400 adjudicated youth participated in the program with about 80 local artists providing arts activities.

The program is a cooperative effort among the Jackson County Prosecutor's office COMBAT division, the Family Court, and the city of Kansas City.



☉Tara¹ shows a necklace that she made at the Children's Arts Institute and has since given to her mother.

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The range of art activities includes almost every type of art imaginable, from visual arts, like painting and sculpture, to performing arts, like theater and African drumming. Each artist is encouraged to pass on not only artistic technique but the range of skills employed in being a professional artist.

"We do live theater here and that means the kids learn acting techniques but they also learn production design, set building, costuming, script writing, marketing, everything that goes into a production," said Martha Sandven Lock, artistic director at the Chameleon Theatre.

Chameleon served about 33 youths through Sentenced to the Arts last year and 30 more from the community at large. The theater will run a summer youth program this year to serve more youths.

"Many of the kids we see are coming from really oppressive situations that totally suppress their creativity and self-expression, but when you put them with artists whose job it is to be creative, then they really come into their own," said Sandven Lock. "What we see is that the kids are really hungry for these opportunities, they really want to work, they just never

had the chance before."

Since it was founded in 1995, Chameleon has drawn national attention for its innovative programs. Last year, Chameleon performed SpiralEye, a youth created play about making positive choices, before Gen. Colin Powell and 5,000 guests at an America's Promise rally. The program received the 2000 National Arts Education Award from cable arts network Bravo, and Sandven Lock is the recipient of a Point of Light Award.

Sandven Lock said Chameleon's mission, to create mentoring opportunities for young people in the arts, matched perfectly with the Sentenced to the Arts objectives.

"It was really a perfect marriage for us," said Sandven Lock. "This program is necessary and vital to these young people for creating a viable lifestyle, it is vital to the art community for creating new artists and it is vital for fostering an audience for the arts that feels truly connected to the artistic process."

Programs like Chameleon Theatre, which have captured the notice of national policy makers, have brought arts education for at-risk youth to the forefront of social policy initiatives. Now, efforts like Sentenced to the Arts are becoming models for social policy.

Angela Castle, grants administrator at COMBAT and coordinator for Sentenced to the Arts, said that officials the Missouri Department of Public Safety in Jefferson

City and the Department of Justice in Washington, D.C., have asked her to present the program at conferences.

"I think it clearly demonstrates that Sentenced to the Arts is on the cutting edge of programming and something we can really build on," Castle said.

What is unique about Sentenced to the Arts, said Kansas City community development specialist Alan Welles, is the level of cooperation among the various government bodies, the courts, social service agencies and the community.

The program is funded by a federal grant from the Department of Justice, the state of Missouri and COMBAT. It is administered by the county Prosecutor's office in conjunction with the Family Court and the non-profit Pan-Educational Institute in Independence. And the program reaches youth all over the county through contacts in every local school district, connecting the youth with artists in a huge range of venues.

"I cannot find another place in the United States that has put together so many funding sources and agencies to make a program like this happen," Welles said.

Castle and COMBAT program director Jim Nunnelly credit Welles with the idea for the Sentenced to the Arts program.

"At the time Alan (Welles) came to us with this idea, we didn't really know it would work," Nunnelly said. "There

was some indication that involvement with the arts reduced the likelihood that a kid would be involved in crime. Now, we know it is true and we are helping to demonstrate that with this program."

Researchers at Central Missouri State University worked with Sentenced to the Arts to evaluate the program in its first year. The evaluation, called the Student Adjustment Inventory, measured indicators of the youths' emotional and social health in areas like self-esteem, communication, academic performance, and attitude, both before and after participation in the arts program.

The results, though not dramatic in every case, clearly indicated improvement in all areas, especially energy and effort and group interaction skills.

"This is a concept of therapeutic jurisprudence, in which law enforcement takes the opportunity of a kid being in trouble to turn that pattern around and get a positive outcome," Nunnelly said.

The approach is similar to the Drug Court developed by COMBAT to move non-violent drug offenders from the criminal courts into a treatment setting.

"What it really does is provides us an opportunity to impact the causes of crime and to intervene in that process before something really serious happens," Nunnelly said.

And, Toombs said, what comes out of the program is not only a youth who will stay out of trouble but one who has developed skills for the future and a connection to their community.

"We try to give these kids a grasp of what art and creativity is really about because, in my opinion, art is not an option, it is a right, " Toombs said "The only way we have grown and evolved as human beings is through our creativity. It is the essence of who we are as people and if we embrace that, then we have a whole new view of life."

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