

# THE ART OF BUSINESS

**Teens mesh creativity and wages in drug-prevention program.**

By **JOE LAMBE**  
The Kansas City Star

**M**ost of the loftlike space in a brick building on the east end of downtown's Crossroads district took a new name early this month: Arts Tech.

Go into 1522 Holmes St. and you en-

## FIRST FRIDAY

MyARTS program participants will be a part of First Friday in the Crossroads. They will sell T-shirts they created and work on a mural from 5:30 to 7:30 p.m. Friday at 1928 Baltimore Ave.

ter a vast social experiment that trains teen artists to work and sell.

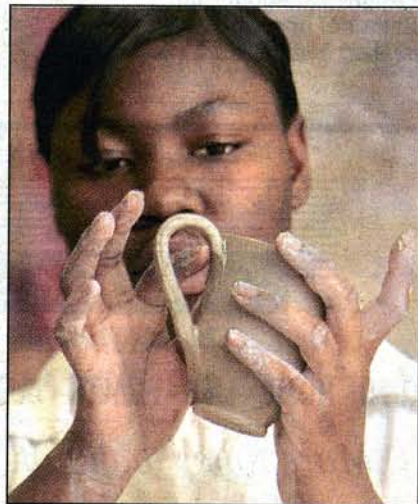
Tonisha Alexander, a 16-year-old Kansas City high school student,

stood in the pottery room pulling wet, raw clay to shape a cup handle. Her thrown pots stood on nearby shelves ready to be fired, glazed and sold.

"Working here made me want to have art as a career," she said. "I want to be an art therapist."

About \$400,000 from several grants and the Jackson County anti-drug sales tax started the MyARTS program last year. Staff renovated the building, bought equipment and

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FRED BLOCHER | THE KANSAS CITY STAR

**Tonisha Alexander, 16, who wants to be an art therapist, worked on ceramics in the MyARTS program at Arts Tech recently.**



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# COMBAT: Program helps at-risk teens earn money with art

trained teens. After 72 hours of training, MyARTS starts paying the teens \$7 an hour to make products.

About 40 at-risk youths from all over Jackson County are in the program, and officials hope to someday have more than 70 in an effort that mostly pays for itself.

That 96-foot mural on a plywood barrier on the west side of the new Sprint Arena is their work. So are pots, logos, brochures, greeting cards, photos and T-shirts and a comic book for a dentist's office.

"It's the culminating program of all we try to do," said Jim Nunnelly, administrator of the anti-drug sales tax. Foundations and businesses already are talking about funding expansion of the program, he said.

"The best drug prevention is a job," he said, "and to some extent that is what we're trying to do."

It's defined as a drug prevention program for at-risk children.

At risk can include poverty, single-parent upbringing, family conflict, drug exposure and many other things.

It goes beyond and is broader than another drug tax program in which judges sentence juvenile offenders to arts classes.

"It teaches the funky facts — a realistic view of the world," Nunnelly said of MyARTS.

Students who want in must get to the center themselves on their own time and be there when they say they will be. The long training period instills discipline and includes subjects like illustration techniques, painting and color use, silk screen and photography.

Then come other grim realities, Nunnelly said, like clients, sales and deadlines.

In the pottery room, Tonisha finally took what would be a cup handle, pressed the top to a table and let other rounded inches of clay hang like a rat's tail. Then she pressed the top into a flatter shape.

"That's how you get the curves of a handle," she said, and she'll later cut off the excess and press the handle onto an unfinished cup.

In the computer design room, teen graphic artists showed off their thick portfo-



PHOTOS BY FRED BLOCHER | THE KANSAS CITY STAR

**MyARTS participants turned a wall into artwork at Arts Tech, 1522 Holmes St. 18-year-old Clarisha Blaylock, above, headed to a meeting there recently. At right, mentor Jade Osborne (left) helped 18-year-old Eunica Reyes with a painting. Reyes says the program has helped her move beyond pencil and pen drawing to painting.**

lio.

There are designs that went on sold postcards, logos, posters and T-shirts. They include about \$800 worth of shirts for a hospital department with complex medical designs.

Shirts and cards are the biggest money makers, officials said, and they want to sell custom shirts to baseball teams, summer camps and others.

Angela Castle, an official who administers the program, talks of the increasing sales and deadlines with glee, mostly.

"They stress me out," she said of her artists. "I don't understand how they're going to get all this done, but they pull it off."

Elsewhere in Arts Tech, after



**"It's the culminating program of all we try to do. The best drug prevention is a job, and to some extent that is what we're trying to do."**

JIM NUNNELLY, ADMINISTRATOR OF THE ANTI-DRUG SALES TAX

passing a wall with a large and bright mural of the downtown skyline, visitors enter another large room. Paintings hang from the walls or stand unfinished on artists' easels.

This is where the team of painters completed the 96-foot-long colorful mural for the National Collegiate Basketball Hall of Fame that now stands on a barrier at Grand Boulevard and 13th Street.

It started with many client-supplied photographs that were composed by MyARTS photographers. Then other artists sketched them and the painting began in a process that took months.

Eunica Reyes, 18, of Kansas City, was among painters at work that day who had also worked on the mural.

The training and so much practice left her sure she wants to go to college and get an art degree, she said. "I used to just draw with pencil and pen — now I know how to use colors and paint."

In another room, a huge silk-screen machine spreads its many paddle-shaped arms like a mechanical octopus. An industrial drier nearby is the only way to dry the special ink forced through the silkscreen mesh (which is really nylon these days) onto shirts, paper or whatever.

J'Trene Barner, 18, of Kansas City, worked at a studio table there making flower designs that would be made into arts posters. Their complexity would be enhanced as she and other artists print overlays onto the original design, she explained.

Behind her, under the drying machine, paper bags with elaborate MyARTS prints on them sat in rows. They were for buyers on the First Friday Crossroads sale on May 4.

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