

Sentenced to the arts

Youths learn the arts with hopes of turning their lives around

The spirits of an ancient art journeyed a long way to reach the nine youth sitting in a circle on the gymnasium floor. Some of the teenage boys sat cross-legged, while others hugged knees or outstretched their legs, as they considered the proposition before them: Making a commitment to learn the Afro-Brazilian cultural art known as Capoeira.

"By being here and trying out, you're saying you're going to make a commitment," Alan Odle, program manager, told them. "What if you don't feel like coming to class? What if your toes hurt?"

It was tryouts night at the McCune Residential Center in Independence, where the emphasis was on the word "try."

"It's who tries harder, not who's better, who gets in the class," dance instructor Sam Good added. He says he bases his decision on three factors: commitment, desire and ability.

Good, also a physical education professor at Penn Valley Community College, has taught the class at McCune for seven years as a part of the Sentenced to the Arts program. The program, a cooperative effort among the Jackson County Prosecutor's office COMBAT division, the Family Court, and the city of Kansas City, matches adjudicated youth with artists in the community to help them learn to express themselves through the arts.

"There's a long tradition in Capoeira," Good tells the youth before they begin. "The first thing is that we have to trust each other. If someone falls, you help him up."

The youth, dressed in regulation khaki-colored slacks and white tees, form two lines across the floor of the brick-walled gymnasium, where the windows are at least 20 feet above ground level.

Good turns on a boom box and demonstrates some beginning moves.

"It's easy, like making triangles," he tells them.

They begin to mimic him as best they can—arms outstretched, front step, back step, front step.

Some of the teens begin to giggle. But several students are concentrating hard; they have taken the class before and are vying to be accepted again. They jokingly call the new students "rookies." Good begins pounding on a drum.

Next, he has each new student partner with a previous student. He assigns the ninth teen to drum duty.

Matthew, 16, who has taken the class before, and John, 17, who has not, pair off. (The youth's names have been changed to protect confidentiality.)

John mimics Matthew, who sports a serious look. But John can't stop laughing.

"Man, you're laughing now but wait until you learn the moves," Matthew tells him.

John tries harder.

"Like that?" he asks.

"Yeah!

"Yeah?"

"Yeah!" Matthew says. "But you gotta keep that smile out. When you get it, you're not gonna laugh. You're gonna love it!"

The roots of Capoeira lie in Africa, but the art itself was created by Africans enslaved in Brazil approximately 400 to 500 years ago. Its history in Brazil is varied, from being once outlawed to later being declared a national sport. Today, it tends to be viewed favorably in that country and abroad as an ancient cultural art.

Good, who studied Capoeira in Brazil, explains it this way.

"It's a martial art, a dance and a game," he said. "And it combines acrobatics, music and singing."

It has a therapeutic component as well.

"The idea is that they enjoy the art so much they get involved in it and it gives them a glimpse into another option. I think they would be a lot more frustrated without Capoeira. It's their only creative outlet, so they put a lot in to it."

Odle admits the school was at first hesitant to offer Capoeira to the youth because of its emphasis on martial arts.

"But in all the years it's been taught here, we've never had one injury or anyone misuse it," he said. Moves are generally feigned as a part of the game.

Once the youth are released from the center, they can take the class free of charge. Good teaches the class to the community at both the Bella Studio of Performance Art in Westport and at Penn Valley Community College. Further, youth are eligible to apply for an internship through Sentenced to the Arts. Good's current intern attended a Capoeira conference in Brazil over the summer.

Angela Castle, grants administrator of COMBAT and coordinator of Sentenced to the Arts, said 6,285 adjudicated youth have participated in the program since its creation in 1999. Art mediums offered are graphic design, musical instruments, music production, theater, dance, photography, video production, creative writing, airplane modeling, ceramics, sculpture, painting and drawing, mask making and regular art therapy.

The program is taught in schools, group homes, churches, lock-down facilities and detention centers.

Funding is received through the U.S. Department of Justice as well as through grants. And each May, the youth exhibit their work in an art show. Last year's show was held at the Folly Theater in Kansas City. Yet another component of the program is MyArts, a 72-hour apprenticeship that is followed by placement in a paid, part-time entrepreneurship position.

"The biggest benefit is that participants in Sentenced to the Arts learn to be responsible for their actions," she said. "And artists are serving as mentors, teaching them life lessons like team work and living healthy."

And she has the proof.

Castle said survey conducted by the University of Central Missouri found there's a 4 to 1 reduction in the youth getting into trouble again and in court referrals. Likewise, there was a change for the better in attitudes toward school and the future, including raising grades a full letter grade, self-improvement changes, more self-confidence and trust, anger self-control and improved communication skills.

"You can't argue with court referrals and recidivism going down and grade point averages going up," Castle said.

Capoeira, some of the youth at McCune say, has helped keep them more focused on positive pursuits.

"In your free time, you get bored. It's nice to have an extra-curricular activity," Luke, 16, said. "I've always been an angry person, always in trouble, didn't like to follow the rules. Now I've found ways to control my anger better."

He said he hoped to continue taking classes once he was released from the center. But transportation could be a problem.

"But I'm gonna try," he added.

Mark, 15, said he didn't know if he liked Capoeira on the first day of class.

"But by the second class, I thought, 'This was hot.' It taught me to have moves, how to jangle, control my anger. It got me out of the cottage so I could stay out of trouble at the cottage. It helps me to know we've got something in common."

The youth report that any issues they have with others in the school classrooms or the cottages where they sleep, they put aside when they enter the gymnasium for Capoeira class. And they report significantly improved school grades, assertions Odle confirms.

As for Matthew, there are days when just knowing there's a Capoeira class that night can shift his attitude.

"It keeps me out of trouble. Sometimes I get mad in here, and I run to my room screaming," he says, the frustration showing on his face as he relives the memory.

He suddenly smiles.

"And then I put on my shoes because it's time for Capoeira," he says.

He repeats the word, drawing the syllables out as if each one was sacred.

"Cap-oh-ware-uh."

The end of tryouts is nearing. The youth have attempted cartwheels and hand-stands and a few more martial arts moves. The laughter is subsiding. And now they sing.

They huddle around Good, shoulder-to-shoulder, as he strums the berimbau a percussion instrument with a single string secured to a reed-like bow with a gourd attached to the bottom.

They mimic him in song, "Ah yi yi yi! Ah yi yi yi!" and clap. Clap-Clap-Clap.

And then "Yi yi yo yo, yo yiiiiiiiiiiii, yo yooooooooo."

Luke, his T-shirt sleeves rolled up to bare his muscles, shimmies his shoulders and throws back his head like a baying coyote. "Yooooooooooooo!" he cries out.

In this moment, they are no longer nine angry youth sentenced to a residential center in a Missouri suburb.

They are tribal brothers.

Afterword: All nine students were accepted into the class. For more information on classes Good teaches in the community,

call 816-719-6069 or 816-759-4328,

Reach Rhiannon Ross at rhiannon.ross@examiner.net or 816-350-6322.

Click here to return to story:

http://examiner.net/stories/012007/new_012007021.shtml