

Inner-city creativity - Kids from the streets learn new avenues of expression*[All Edition]*

Providence Journal - Providence, R.I.

Author: CHANNING GRAY Journal Arts Writer

Date: Feb 25, 2001

Section: Arts

Text Word Count: 2234

Document Text*Copyright Providence Journal/Evening Bulletin Feb 25, 2001*

PROVIDENCE - It's Valentine's Day and the West End Community Center on Bucklin Street is humming. Kids have gathered in a main activities room for pizza, cupcakes, a chance to shoot pool and burn off a little steam.

But next door, in the quiet of a stark cinderblock space crammed with computers, 10-year-old Kevin Hernandez is learning about the violin and, more importantly, the possibilities that lie ahead of him.

Hernandez, who's been playing for a little more than a year, will have in a half-hour span mastered the folk tune, O Come Little Children. Helping him over the hurdles of rhythm and fingering is Sebastian Ruth, a 25-year-old Brown University graduate, who believes with a passion that music can make a difference in people's lives.

Ruth, along with three musician friends who make up a resident string quartet based in Providence's poorer neighborhoods, has spend the last few years giving free violin lessons at community centers to inner-city youngsters. His program is called Community MusicWorks, but it goes way beyond learning to read notes.

Perhaps more than any other inner-city program, Community MusicWorks has helped bridge the patchwork of cultures that make up the city's West End and South Side. Students join their parents about five times a year for bus trips to hear the Boston Philharmonic, one of two orchestras Ruth performs with. Every six weeks or so there are student recitals followed by pot-luck suppers, in which parents, many of whom are immigrants, share dishes from their native lands.

Workshops expose the students to other forms of music, too, such as African drumming.

"You know how they say you've got to walk the walk and talk the talk," says Ken Goode, program director for West End Community Center. "Well, Sebastian walks the walk."

He's not the only one.

Project New Urban Arts

Over in a cramped storefront on Westminster Street, high schoolers gather in the afternoons to write poetry, paint and draw, part of Project New Urban Arts, a similar program started by another Brown grad, Tyler Denmead.

In a former manufacturing building on Broad Street, kids are learning ballet, ceramics, drumming and photography through CityArts, started 10 years ago as a summer program to keep children off the streets.

Not far from CityArts, AS220, the downtown arts collaborative, has set up an outpost where the arts are used to help kids from the state Training School re-enter the outside world.

Once the pastime of youngsters of privilege, arts programs are flourishing in neighborhoods that had been known more for crime, poverty and violence. They have spilled out of museums and trendy galleries into community centers and once-derelict store fronts. And they appear to be making a difference in the lives of kids who have had little if any previous exposure to things such as classical music and ballet.

Said Ragan Meriweather, whose daughter Jazmin studies cello at Community MusicWorks: "It's been an integral part of her growth and development. But she wouldn't be doing this if the program wasn't in the community."

Programs such as Community MusicWorks and New Urban Arts are unusual in that they are not outreach components of some larger non-profit looking for a conscience or a way to make their grant applications seem sexier.

The idea behind these grass-roots efforts is to be accessible, which is to say free and based in the community as support for kids when they hit rough patches in their lives.

Ruth had been toying with the model for his project ever since his student days at Brown, when he studied under education reformer Ted Sizer. Could music, could the discipline and pride that comes from mastering an art form, be used to change lives?

He was able to persuade Brown's Swearer Center to underwrite a resident string quartet that would be based in the city's low-income neighborhoods, not coming from "high on the hill." Besides Ruth, who usually plays viola in the quartet, the members are violinists Minna Choi and Ben Rous, plus cellist Heath Marlow, who comes down from Boston each week to teach.

Ruth figured he'd meet with at least initial resistance from residents, who might feel he had an agenda or who needed time to check him out. But when he walked into the West End Community Center and told Goode what he had in mind, Goode snapped up the proposal.

Goode, a longtime community organizer, was willing to give Ruth a chance. But even he was "shocked," he says, when parents rushed to sign their kids up for lessons. These are youngsters who've been reared on rap and hip-hop, not Haydn and Beethoven.

Today the program gives free lessons to 50 students in the South Side, West End Elmwood and Olneyville. Another 30 are on the waiting list, and the West End Community Center is starting to talk about building Ruth a music room.

Others are starting to notice the program, too. Contributions are already twice what they were for all of last year. Ruth has not wanted to go looking for major support until he established a track record. He has also tried to resist growing too fast, thus risking a falloff in quality.

While teaching violin to poor kids with little exposure to the arts might seem unusual, Ruth doesn't think so. It may just seem that way because no one else has tried.

"It's dangerous the way we stereotype inner-city kids," said Ruth, who grew up in the small college town of Ithaca, N.Y., where his father is a teacher. "Where do we get that information?"

"Like any culture, people have desires. And kids are no different, except in this case they're totally passionate about violin."

Good-bye pre-med

Denmead, 24, was planning to become a doctor when he arrived at Brown in 1994. But a stint as an apprentice chef during a summer stay in France put the Ohio native in touch with his creative side.

"Prior to that I'd never thought of myself as creative," said Denmead, who still harbors bitter memories of a grade school art teacher putting down his paintings.

Denmead dropped out of pre-med when he returned to Brown, hung out with creative types, and began painting and writing. Since the arts had turned his life around, he began thinking about ways in which he could use them to bring about change in others, especially troubled urban youth.

Participation in an independent study program looking at after-school opportunities for youth led him to form New Urban Arts four years ago. Its first home was a downtown space over Grace Church on Mathewson Street. That served a handful of students. Now, like Community MusicWorks, there's a long waiting list.

Denmead, who had met Ruth at Brown, was thinking much along the same lines as he was: Carve out a space where students feel they belong, where they are comfortable expressing themselves.

High schoolers who take part in Denmead's program spend a semester learning an arts discipline, mostly from local college students, who seem to make the most effective role models.

The kids are then expected to come up with a project that works with people in the community. This spring, for example, students from New Urban Arts will create a piece of outdoor public sculpture for the Woonasquatucket Greenway, an area bordering the river that's being spruced up for public use. It runs from Providence Place to Olneyville.

Sister Ann Keefe

The push to bring art programs to the inner city actually began a decade ago, when Sister Ann Keefe, a community activist working out of St. Michael's Church on Oxford Street, went looking for a summer program to keep kids off the streets.

The story goes that Sister Keefe was sitting in her car one sweltering summer afternoon when youngsters surrounded the vehicle and began rocking it in a playful fashion. Wasn't there a way to channel all that energy into something more creative and rewarding?

After a series of meetings with parents, police and community leaders, it was determined that despite the flourishing downtown arts scene, there was a shortage of cultural activities in the neighborhoods.

"We have good arts programs around here," said Sister Keefe, "but they cost a pretty penny, and they are not in the community."

Five years ago, CityArts moved from St. Michael's into a 30,000- square foot manufacturing building at 891 Broad St. The place needs lots of work but has great potential. A half-dozen studios are under construction at the rear of the building for professional artists from the community. They would serve as examples, and be on hand to help students.

The building also serves as home to the Sol Gallery, which features mostly Latino and African-American artists. While the gallery is open to the public, it's also a place where CityArts's 180 students can check out the work of professional artists and catch gallery talks and workshops.

At this point classes are being offered in ballet, Caribbean dance, drumming, ceramic and photography, among others.

Plans also call for a sculpture garden in the lot at the rear of the building, and perhaps the most intriguing component, turning a large garage space into an industrial arts studio. That would be run in conjunction with AS220, which has already moved into a space not far from CityArts on Broad Street.

Bert Crenca's view

AS220's Bert Crenca had been teaching at the state Training School and was impressed with the arts programs for the kids locked up there. But he wondered: What happens to these kids once they get out?

When he went to discuss this issue with Brother Michael Reis of Tides Family Services, which is located in the former Donnelly's clothing store, he noticed a 3,000-square-foot heated garage. Last month, the Broad Street Studio opening in that space, giving arts classes to about 15 youngsters who have been at the Training School.

"Give us three or four months," said Crenca, "and you'll be hearing about this place.

"If we can channel their passion and energy into making art, you'll see some meaningful stuff come out of here."

Crenca insists teachers first work in the Training School so they will be familiar with issues facing these youngsters and to better develop bonds with them. "These kids don't feel right about a place," he said, "they don't come back."

Crenca is talking about teaching more marketable skills at CityArts, things such as welding, glassmaking and audio-visual classes. He'd like to see the students develop a product line, too.

Beyond school

It's hard at this point for programs like Community MusicWorks to cite dramatic results, such as kids going off to Juilliard (although one New Urban Arts grad now attends the Pratt Institute of Art in New York.)

But Ruth and Denmead will tell you they're not interested in creating more painters and violinists.

Should that happen, fine. But their programs are more about giving kids avenues to express themselves, to have confidence in themselves.

In most cases, the success stories are small, like the little girl who told Ruth she wanted to quit the violin. Ruth said he noticed her work was falling off, but urged her to at least stick with it until the next recital, that she could quit then if she wished.

It was at the concert that she met a man who told her he once had a son who played the violin and wanted to quit. When she found out the man was Ruth's father, she understood she was not alone in her feelings, and started to practice again.

Ruth said she was one of the first to sign up for lessons this year.

"Just to have a project that lasts from third grade through high school," said Ruth, "something you

don't get in school, is one of the compelling reasons for a program. This can provide structure and a supportive community for a child, and that's pretty powerful.

"But it's also an art form, mechanical but imaginative. And that transfers to life. It helps children conceive of bigger opportunities for themselves. ...

"If there's someone pushing me and encouraging me, what else can I do? If I can learn a whole song in one lesson, what else is out there for me?"

To reach Community MusicWorks, call 831-2190 or write Sebastian Ruth at 30 Messer St., Providence, 02909.

Project New Urban Arts is at 743 Westminster St., 02903. Call 751- 4556.

For information on programs offered by CityArts, 891 Broad St., call 941-0795.

Joelle Jensen is head of youth services for AS200, 115 Empire St., 02903. She's at 454-3951 (or Joelle@as220.org) and can fill you in on the arts group's Broad Street Studio.

* * *

THE FRONT WINDOW of New Urban Arts on Westminster Street reflects the urban setting as students and a mentor work inside.

JOURNAL PHOTO / MARY MURPHY

* * *

JAN-DELLE JOHNSON, 10, practices the violin piece she will play during a Community MusicWorks concert.

JOURNAL PHOTOS / ANDY DICKERMAN

* * *

SARA SCHEDLER, left, a Brown University senior, and Classical students Jennifer Urbina and Anknwha Blain discuss poetry after school at New Urban Arts.

JOURNAL PHOTO / MARY MURPHY

* * *

BERT CRENCA: "You'll be hearing about this place."

JOURNAL PHOTO / FILES

* * *

WENDOLYN CEDENO, 10, right, waits to practice at Community MusicWorks; in the background is Claudia Espino, 9.

JOURNAL PHOTO / ANDY DICKERMAN

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction or distribution is prohibited without permission.

Abstract (Document Summary)

[Sebastian Ruth], along with three musician friends who make up a resident string quartet based in Providence's poorer neighborhoods, has spend the last few years giving free violin lessons at community centers to inner-city youngsters. His program is called Community MusicWorks, but it goes way beyond learning to read notes.

Perhaps more than any other inner-city program, Community MusicWorks has helped bridge the patchwork of cultures that make up the city's West End and South Side. Students join their parents about five times a year for bus trips to hear the Boston Philharmonic, one of two orchestras Ruth performs with. Every six weeks or so there are student recitals followed by pot-luck suppers, in which parents, many of whom are immigrants, share dishes from their native lands.

In most cases, the success stories are small, like the little girl who told Ruth she wanted to quit the violin. Ruth said he noticed her work was falling off, but urged her to at least stick with it until the next recital, that she could quit then if she wished.

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction or distribution is prohibited without permission.