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Focus on Youth

Transitional program for juvenile offenders builds community through the arts

By Geoff Griffin

The Broad Street Community Studio is a new arts education program run by AS220, a nonprofit center for the arts in Providence, Rhode Island. The Broad Street Studio targets at-risk youth, with a focus on youth from the Rhode Island Training School, the state's juvenile detention facility. Using an arts-immersion program that leverages student initiative and creativity with a three-part transitional structure, the Broad Street Studio aims to reduce the recidivism rate while building a community resource that will serve the students, and the communities in which they live, long after they have completed the program.

Need for transitional programs

Since 1985, AS220 has worked to provide opportunities for creative expression to all Rhode Island artists, professional and amateur, traditional and experimental. This work is inspired by a commitment to the idea that art can be a powerful tool for transformation, both for individuals and for communities. Today, AS220's three-story building is full of artists, residents and volunteers who can testify to the impact of AS220's open, inclusive mission.

In the late 1990s, AS220 reached out to a number of local public high schools, including the Rhode Island Training School. AS220 began with a few short-term collaborations, including the staging of youth performance nights and the publication of a book of poetry by Training School residents. These projects were important first steps, but it quickly became clear that, without a follow-up strategy, they would have a limited impact on students.

There needed to be some context for students to continue their relationship with AS220 and the arts. Nowhere was that more true than at the Training School, where transitional programs had been identified as a key element in reducing the recidivism rate. By creating a program in which students were working with the same materials and instructors, before and after their release, AS220 would help youth negotiate a difficult transition.

Three-part structure

For students, the Broad Street Studio program begins with an orientation class and a series of introductory workshops while they are still at the Rhode Island Training School. The weekly orientation class is loosely structured, providing an opportunity for students to experiment amongst their peers with music, drawing and the written and spoken word. Students who are intrigued by the orientation class have the opportunity to participate in the

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introductory workshops. These six-week workshops take a closer look at particular media; the first three cover photography, video and drumming. The goal of both the orientation class and the introductory workshop is to demystify the language and materials used by artists and introduce students to the instructors they will meet at the Broad Street Studio.

Students who respond well to the orientation class and the introductory workshops have the opportunity to attend

the Broad Street Studio upon their release. The Broad Street Community Studio is an intense after-school learning environment located in a Providence neighborhood where many of the Training School residents live. The program at the studio runs five days a week; students are asked to participate for three months, with opportunities to continue their involvement beyond those three months. A typical week alternates long-term projects that have concrete outcomes, like photography and theatre, with less-structured activities like the Hip Hop workshops, where students are free to explore turntables, spray paint and draw in their sketchbooks. Leadership is a mix of AS220 staff, AmeriCorps*VISTA members and professional artists. There are at least three adults with the students at all times.

Creating community

The structure of Broad Street Studio program recognizes that this population needs more than simple training in the arts. These youth also need a community, one that can replace the one left behind when they were released from the Training School, and can compete with the one they belonged to when they committed the infraction that put them in the Training School. The participants must lead the development of the community, but the Broad Street Studio has strategies in place to help facilitate this development. These include:

Youth participation: Every effort has been made to involve the participants in the creation of the program. During the first month, students reviewed the blueprints for the studio space, participated in the planning of the second month's curriculum, and picked up spray cans to create a mural on the studio walls. When the students saw their suggestions and work incorporated into the Broad Street Studio, they recognized themselves as co-creators of this new community.

Cooperative learning: The structure of the curriculum mirrors the ways that individuals find their place in a community. The focus of the daily workshops shifts from individual student work to collaboration and group discussion and back again. By using a group teaching approach, the leadership of the studio sets an example of collaboration and cooperation for the students.

Opportunities for continued participation: The post release portion of the program is designed to last three months, but there are already strategies in place that allow participants to continue their involvement in the Studio long after they have completed the program. The weekly schedule has several open classes like the Hip Hop workshop that will welcome participation from alumni. Harnessing student and alumni initiative may develop other projects, like a Broad Street orchestra, design firm or traveling production. Broad Street Studio leadership is identifying programs that will provide stipends for alumni to serve as mentors for new enrollees. AS220 has been proactive in establishing relationships with other arts and social service programs in the Broad Street area with the goal of integrating the Studio into the daily life of the neighborhood.

Partnerships: the key to success

By choosing to work so intensely with this population, AS220 has moved into new territory. Collaboration with other agencies with more experience with at-risk populations was key to developing the program. The staff and administration of the Rhode Island Training School have been very open to this collaboration, integrating AS220's work into a broader effort to strengthen the school's arts curriculum. The Corporation for National Service provided vital trained manpower through the AmeriCorps*VISTA program, and two key Studio staff members are now sup-



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ported through VISTA.

AS220 also partnered with Tides Family Services for this project, which freed AS220 to play to its strength, Arts instruction. Tides is a private nonprofit social services agency that provides tracking, education, counseling and advocacy to disadvantaged youth and their families. The Broad Street Studio is housed in a space adjacent to Tides, and all of the first month's participants were also part of Tides' program. Without the help of an agency that could handle so many of this population's needs, it would have been difficult indeed for AS220 to undertake this program.

Challenges/successes

After the first month of workshops at the Studio, the basic foundation of the project has proven to be sound, but there are more challenges to be faced.

The biggest of these for the post release portion of the program is recruitment. The first month the program had five participants, two of whom attended regularly. This small class size allowed for excellent personal instruction, but it made it difficult to create a strong community identity.

Fortunately, this challenge should be relieved by the success of the prerelease programs. After three introductory workshops and five months of the orientation class at the Training School, student interest has steadily increased to the point where the class has split into two sessions and the workshops have had to limit enrollment. These classes serve to recruit students for the post release program, and their growth should impact the post release enrollment in the coming months. In February, a shift in the admission requirements brought in a class of ten students, double the size of the previous month.

The Broad Street Studio has a first-year budget of \$145,000, which is met through funds from the Rhode Island Juvenile Justice Commission, the Rhode Island Foundation and in-kind contributions from the partners mentioned above. This budget does not include funding, however, for the long range goal of providing stipends to program alumni who return to act as mentors, and the Broad Street Studio leadership is currently looking for new sources of revenue to support this.

Geoff Griffin is the Communications Director for AS220. He has worked with middle school and high school populations in schools, after school programs, and AS220's outreach efforts for ten years. He may be reached at AS220, 115 Empire Street, Providence RI 02903 (401) 831-9327 or geoff@as220.org. For more information on the Broad Street Community Studio, visit www.as220.org/broadstreet.