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The art of learning

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PROVIDENCE

The art of learning



Journal-Bulletin/TIMOTHY C. BARMANN

SELF-EXPRESSION comes naturally to George Threats, 11, center, who belts out the lyrics to a song he wrote as he and others record a rap song in a recording studio at AS220 yesterday. At left is Matthew Curran and at right, Germaine King. The fifth graders were studying art first-hand.

In art, pupils imitate life

■ A Youth Arts Conference gives Sackett Street School fifth graders a chance to experience the life and work of artists.

By GINA MACRIS
Journal-Bulletin Staff Writer

PROVIDENCE — Fifth graders from the Sackett Street School went downtown to work in artists' studios at AS220 yesterday, but their artistic experience actually began a few weeks ago with a reading assignment about that "special place for the arts in Providence."

Like any other reading lesson, the story about AS220 highlighted certain vocabulary; words like "alternative space" and "revitalize" and "blighted building."

Those words figure in the decade-long saga of the group of artists that eventually raised enough money to turn a decrepit three-story building at 115 Empire St. into a new forum for the arts, with space for studios, living quarters, theaters and a cafe.

The story of the success of AS220, which has people talking about an arts and entertainment district down-

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TAKING DIRECTION: Joseph Auger, of AS220, explains to the students that cooperation is important in the collaborative work of recording music.

AS220

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town, also stood out as real-life lesson in what people can do if they work together.

AS220, by the way, combines the numbers from the address of the original art forum at 220 Weybosset St. with the initials for "art space" or "alternative space." It's a detail the children learned in their reading assignment.

And after all that build-up, the entire fifth grade — about 60 children, including special education students — got a chance to work at AS220 themselves.

Millicent Espada, who signed up for drawing with illustrator Keith Munslow, said, "It's fun. You have to be creative and use a lot of your imagination."

Millicent was asked whether being creative is also a lot of work.

She nodded, describing how she closed her eyes and thought hard about what she wanted to draw before she actually set to work.

"Everybody has a different imagination," she said, as she showed off her "moogle," a benign-but-ugly creature that she had drawn as a boy with a cat-like grin and a fin growing out of his side.

"You get to draw cool stuff," said Andy Flete, who got tips from Munslow about ways to bring movement to his drawing of a "moogle."

The day-long Youth Arts Conference, financed by the Rhode Island Foundation and the Very Special Arts, was AS220's first plunge into art education.

"It's important for people to realize that arts are an important part of the community," said Laura Travis, who is both an art teacher at the Sackett Street School and a member of the board of directors of AS220.

"It's important to tell people about it, but not everyone is going to come through the door," said Travis.

"If we get kids in here to have this experience, hopefully they'll take ideas away," she said.

Travis engineered the multifaceted art education project with the help of all the school's fifth grade teachers.

AS220 made a video recording of the day's events that the organization hopes to parlay into more funding for a continuing art education program.

It cost about \$3,000 to put on the event, or about \$50 a child, according to Umberto Crenca, AS220's artistic director.

As practicing artists, the fifth graders were asked to choose the workshops they preferred and were given packets of material about AS220 that included biographies of their workshop leaders.

They also received T-shirts that

commemorated the day with a log that played on the title of the Youth Arts Conference with the initial YAC and drawings of three yaks, touch of humor designed by illustrator Munslow.

At first, it was hard to find the children, except for six or seven muralists who were working at the entrance of 115 Empire St. under the supervision of Angel Quinonez.

The young artists were very quiet, apparently so absorbed in their work that they didn't have time to mess around.

Working from a photo, each youngster was busy covering a section of the wall with a full-length portrait of Crenca. Several versions of Crenca's bald dome bobbed across one wall and turned a corner. One artist put Crenca in a dress.

"I would have picked a different dress," Crenca said with a straight face when he was asked what he thought of the mural.

The other children had spread out in six other workshops over three floors. Some of them took pictures of each other and developed the negatives in a basement darkroom, a workshop in science as well as art that was run by photographer Scott Lapham.

Others sweated in a first floor dance studio with Cathi Nicoli, building individual movements, beat by beat, into a number that flowed against a musical curtain of rhythm and blues.

Upstairs on the second floor, Russell Kellogg led a workshop in acting that taught the children to become aware of their bodies and how they move.

Down the hall, producer Joseph Auger taught students what it takes to work in a real recording studio — including attention to technical detail and cooperation.

"Teachers don't make enough money," said a harried Auger after spending a morning with the children.

When he listened carefully to the music and words the children had recorded, he heard a rap piece that poignantly reflected a fear of the streets and the indiscriminate violence that emanates from the drug trade.

"I be watchin' my back, somebody gonna smoke me" ... "I'm saying to God, please forgive me ... I never thought I'd get my family killed."

Auger said he was shocked. "It's a tragedy they have to deal with adult issues," he said.

He said he was thinking about cutting the rap piece out of the tape, but he quickly decided against it.

"It's an authentic statement," he said.

"When it comes to self-expression, it has to be done without censorship. That's vital, especially for kids," he said.