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Kids from the streets learn new avenues of expression

Inner-city creativity

THE FRONT WINDOW of New Urban Arts on Westminster Street reflects the urban setting as students and a mentor work inside.
By CHANNING GRAY
JOURNAL ARTS WRITER

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 spent 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 storefronts. 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."

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