

## Art Start Sparks Creativity in NYC Shelters

Homeless children in New York City shelters are finding expression for their ideas and experiences through an innovative program that brings art and artists into the shelters.

Scott Rosenberg, an NYU film school grad who also works in the fine arts, co-founded Art Start in 1991 as a way to combine his love of the arts with working with children

in need. He quickly discovered that exposing children to the arts opened their lives in other ways. "They can transfer the creative experience to other parts of their lives - going to school, going to yet another shelter, dealing with their friends," says Rosenberg. "It really is more like basic supportive developmental stuff."

Nearly 10,000 children are in New York City's shelter system on any given night, says the Legal Aid Society. Says Rosenberg, "Because they have to survive and not crumble, these kids have developed so much strength, and as a result, they have a lot to offer."

Art Start in turn has offered 1,700 children exposure to more than 200 artists and educators through Arts in the Shelters and a second program, Media Works, aimed at teens in last-chance schools. Art Start takes a learner-centered approach to the creative process. "Rather than telling them this is what we're going to do, this is how we'll cut it and what we want it to say, we involve them in the process from the beginning," says Rosenberg. "'What do you think? What does this mean to you?' We'll guide, but it's really learner-centered. The



**Scott Rosenberg, founding director of Art Start, assists student Lani Parrilia during the filming of students' "Protect Your Child Against Racism" public service announcement.**

kids are really invested in the project because it has to do with their experiences and what they see."

The children's work is published in the "Art Start Paper," which is distributed to families, shelter workers and the arts community.

"Seeing your own

work published is powerful stuff," says Rosenberg. "We also want to develop an Art Start store. Art isn't pure - it doesn't belong in a space that's untainted by economics. These kids know it - because of economics, they don't have a home."

Media Works helps young people examine the media through popular culture, culminating in the creation of a public service announcement. Though it just completed a two-year pilot run, Rosenberg hopes to make it an ongoing part of Art Start. Rebecca Sinclair, a 20-year-old physics major at Hunter College, says, "Before [Media Works], I liked to write, but I was really bad as far as grammar goes. You learn mathematics and economics by budgeting [to make the ad]. You learn grammar because you have to write. And it teaches you organizational skills. It also opens your eyes. Children who have trouble in school have a tendency to be hostile; they feel intimidated. It makes children more willing to be more comfortable in an academic environment."

With success comes additional needs, and Art Start is seeking a permanent space, nonprofit status and a board of directors that reflects the community's diversity. Amid Art Start's achievements and what Rosenberg calls the "serious responsibility" of receiving the 1997 President's Service Award remains the poignancy of the children Art Start serves.

"The most bittersweet moment in all of this for me was three kids we had at one of the first shelters Art Start went to. They were siblings, and they did wonderful work. And as will happen in the shelter system, one week, they just weren't there. A year later, we were at another shelter. One evening we came in and started, and the same three kids came tearing in saying, 'Art Start is here!'"

Rosenberg goes on, "Homeless shelters are really grim, tough, painfully depressing environments. As exhilarating as it is to work with the kids and see them blossom, it's also very draining and tough - to me, that's where the artists are heroic. No one in Art Start has gotten a penny for what they do, and it's rare we have money to reimburse anyone for resources."

**Art Start, 212-966-7807**



**Artist and volunteer Evan Spiridellis and Art Start's young performers rehearse the chorus part of "Romeo and Juliet" an acting workshop.**