

Art for heart's sake

Program gives homeless youth chance to shine

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Imagine you never knew where you were going to sleep each night. You're homeless, and where you — and sometimes your family — lay your weary heads at the end of the day depends mostly on which crowded city shelter can find room for you.

Art Start, a 10-year-old program that brings art and art education to homeless children and their families, tries to give some stability to the transient existence shared by the estimated 50,000 people in the city's shelter system.

Art Start Executive Director Simon Fulford, who co-founded the program with board President Scott Rosenberg, said the group does this by offering regular programs at several shelters throughout the city, including the Huntington House Shelter in the East Village. All told, some 100 to 150 youngsters between 3 and 18 are touched by Art Start each week.

"We have our program if one person shows up or if the room is full," Fulford said. "Sometimes kids will attend for a while and then disappear because the family was relocated to another shelter or found a house. Sometimes they disappear and then turn up again because the family is homeless again."

These are not finger-painting and lanyard-weaving classes. Fulford said the group is intent on providing programs that would

keep kids, particularly teenagers, coming back for more while also providing them with an inside look at the business of art.

Children drawn to the Art in the Shelters program may find themselves working on Art Start's Hip Hop Project, for example, connecting teenagers with rap entrepreneurs like Def Jam Records founder Russell Simmons and other music company executives and performing artists so the kids can have a look at all aspects of the music business. Some even work as interns at major music houses around the city, such as Sony and Columbia Records.

Back at Art Start's West Broadway offices downtown, the teens then research the marketplace to come up with an album concept, create a budget for it, write performer contracts and song lyrics, perform the music and even come up with promotional products such as T-shirts and coffee mugs.

Teens enrolled in the group's Media Workshop have created magazines and other publications. One Brooklyn member even created a company, 5 Elements, that designs greeting cards with hip messages.

Play your part in Art Start

Art Start, which operates under the slogan "Use what you do every day to change a child's life," is looking for volunteers. Call (212)966-7807 or E-mail the group at info@art-start.org for more information.

The company's slogan is "Turning nothing into something."

"We provide the structure, but the kids provide the ideas of what they want to do," said Christopher (Funky) Rolle, 25, the Hip Hop Project director who used to hustle city streets before he found Art Start in 1994.

"As they go along, they learn a lot of things — more than they realized they would learn. They develop their creative side, but they also develop the ability to think critically and creatively, which takes them to the next level.

"A lot of kids have a microwave mentality — they expect everything to happen now and get frustrated when it doesn't," he said. "But we teach them to work toward a goal, something they like; but along the way, we get to reveal these jewels to them. And they get people who listen to their ideas with respect for their creativity."

And it makes a difference, even in the most street-hardened teenager, according to the Art Start philosophy.

"We have had students who committed a crime," said Fulford, 31. "What you find is most of that hard exterior is a facade. Society doesn't believe they have anything to offer, but they really have a lot to give and only need an opportunity to give back."

These are people like Keshawn (Kasino) Seeley, 20, a once-homeless teenager who joined Art Start in 1994. He's now a program assistant.

"I used to think no one cared about me, but these people do," he said. "They showed me that I had things to offer the world."

Volunteers — there are about 30 — such as filmmaker and writer Ann Duddy say trying to turn a child into a fledgling artist can mean finding inspiration for themselves, as well.

"Longtime artists tend to censor ourselves as to what works and doesn't work, what you can and can't do," Duddy said. "But kids will just try it and see if it works, and sometimes it does work in a spectacular way."

All of this is done on a \$350,000 budget, most of it supplied by the New York State Office of Children's and Family Services, Fulford said.

But Art Start is looking to expand, and that means mounting expenses and the need for more funding.

"We'd like to have programs in the shelters 365 days a year," Fulford said. "We simply cannot afford to do that now. We're looking at ways to raise more money."

Members of the Art Start team: (from l) Keshawn (Kasino) Seeley, Christopher (Funky) Rolle, volunteer Mimi Theobalds and Simon Fulford.

