

The Art of



Creating Stability

Homeless Children Find Confidence, Trust, and Expression through Arts Programs

by Carol Ward

Twelve-year-old “Jose” likes to rap. At the shelter in which he currently resides in New York City, the boy participates in music classes offered weekly by Art Start, a nonprofit group that provides art programming at three shelters in the city.

“I like to rap and do drums,” Jose says. “I rap about living in the shelter,” he says, noting his frustrations with his current situation. Putting his thoughts in rap form makes things “a little bit” better.

Across the country in Portland, Oregon, a homeless young adult who goes by the name of Jukeboxxxe has found a sanctuary at p:ear, a group dedicated to building positive relationships through art and education with homeless and transitional youth up to age 24. Jukeboxxxe, who became homeless as a teen, says p:ear is an escape from life on the street.

“It’s kind of a sanctuary where I can work on my music and hang out with friends and not have to worry about influences that are easily found on the street,” Jukeboxxxe says. P:ear has a music room as well as areas devoted to other arts, and Jukeboxxxe uses the facility to practice for his stints as a street performer.

Arts programs that attempt to positively impact the lives of homeless children and teens can be found in a few major cities, super-sizing the less formalized “arts and crafts” sessions offered in some shelters and homeless outreach facilities. Options run the gamut, from painting and drawing to theater

to music and dance. A few are formalized “teaching” programs but most just seek to provide a creative diversion and a bit of therapy for some of society’s most vulnerable children.

The art programs can also fill an educational gap caused by the pullback by most school districts in art education. According to a recent report from the National Endowment for the Arts, just 49.5% of 18-year-olds in 2008 had arts education between 1990 and 2007. That compares to 65% of 18-year-olds who had arts education between 1964 and 1981, the study said. While that study encompasses all children, no matter what their socioeconomic level, other studies suggest disadvantaged children are bearing the brunt of the cutbacks. A 2009 report on Access to Arts Education published by the Government Accountability Office found that teachers at schools identified as needing improvement and those with higher percentages of minority students were more likely to report a reduction in time spent on the arts.

Creativity and Stability

When working with homeless and at-risk children and teens, the art itself often takes a backseat to other, more basic goals. “We’re not trying to make them into little painters or bass players,” Johanna de los Santos, executive director of Art Start, says of the homeless children who receive instruction from the group’s artists and volunteers.

“First and foremost our goal is just having regular programming in a place that is inherently unstable,” de los Santos says. “In the city shelters families don’t have a lot of freedom, and they don’t really know from one week to the next whether they’re going to be living there or not. But they know we’re going to be there, they know they’ll see the same faces and there are the same rules and expectations when they show up.”

Free Arts of Arizona finds that children respond differently to various types of art, so they encourage children to create artwork using multiple media. Tissue paper, construction paper, and marker were used to create this collage.

That is a key benefit at shelters operated by A New Leaf in Arizona. Homeless children living at six different shelters receive arts instruction from Free Arts of Arizona, a mentorship program for homeless and abused children. Free Arts commits to a multi-week program and sends the same volunteers each week.



These artworks completed by homeless children from ArtBridge Houston, DrawBridge in San Francisco, and Free Arts of Arizona show the universal importance of love and positive relationships to children.

“This is a committed volunteer who comes in and builds relationships with the kids,” says Torrie Taj, executive vice president for resource development for A New Leaf. “These kids have lots of people coming and going in their lives and they need stability. We really appreciate and honor that they have a consistent volunteer come in for a set number of weeks to do a project. It’s a really big deal with the kids.

“In many cases, stability has been lacking in the lives of these kids,” Taj continues. “Any time we can offer a stable base, a stable relationship, it’s a healthy thing.”

Like Art Start, Free Arts of Arizona uses “art as the vehicle,” but it is also less about art and more about filling other needs of children, says Executive Director Barbara DuVal Fenster. Although focused on bringing art in its broadest form to children, the massive program, involving 550 active volunteers, also includes shelter outreach, summer camps, and other programs.

“Our intention is to give these children the message that they matter, that they’re important,” DuVal Fenster says. “We want to give them a little bit of self-confidence and help them have a little bit better understanding of themselves. We use a whole variety of art because kids respond to different things.”

Funding Challenges

Demand for these “extra” services is on the rise in many communities. “The need never ends,” says Beverly Bentley, executive director of ArtBridge Houston. “We have a waiting list of shelters that would like to be served.” Of course, funding can be a challenge, especially given the current economic climate. Bentley says foundations have been scaling back their commitments, especially multi-year commitments. “It’s very competitive right now,” she says, noting that many nonprofits are struggling as the homeless population expands and the economy falters.

“The larger foundations used to do multiyear grants, which were valuable to an organization like ArtBridge because we’re tiny and we operate on a very lean budget,” she says, noting the pressures of constantly seeking funding. But Bentley says that the Houston community has always come through.

In programs such as ArtBridge Houston and its counterparts in other cities, the instructors and materials are provided by the program operators free of charge to shelters. Shelters simply provide the space necessary for the visiting programs.

But sometimes, shelters get involved on the funding side as well. Brian Greenberg, director of programs and services for Shelter Network, a group of shelters serving the homeless population of the San Francisco peninsula, works with arts-education provider DrawBridge in seeking funding so that DrawBridge can continue to offer programming in several Shelter Network locations.

Greenberg says both Shelter Network and DrawBridge write grants for funding for the program, and says “it’s not an impossible thing” to get funded. “Art therapy for kids is kind of a sexy thing for funders to fund,” he says. “And it’s not all that expensive. For us, a grant of \$6,000 or \$7,000 can pay for art therapy one night a week at each of four shelters for a year, with \$1,000 left over for materials.” (At press time, DrawBridge was facing a funding crisis, and had planned to cease operations in June if funding didn’t materialize.)

Art Therapy

Shelter Network takes a proactive approach because programs like DrawBridge and others are invaluable in shelters, Greenberg says. The art opportunities afforded to sheltered children are part of a slate of programs that “ameliorate the most devastating effects of homelessness,” he says.

Provider and shelter workers say the therapeutic benefits of such art programs—whether it is allowing kids to work through problems in a non-verbal way or simply allowing them to create a project of which they can be proud—are immeasurable but important.

“It’s helping children and young adults feel their potential,” says Bentley, who adds that many of the children served have received very little positive reinforcement in their lives.

Penny Fellbrich, children’s coordinator at Family Crossroads shelter in Daly City, California, believes the program is therapeutic to children dealing with trauma.

“They get to express their feelings non-verbally,” Fellbrich says. “The children don’t always realize when they’re just happily making art that they are kind of working through some of their own feelings and experiences. There is a kind of distance. They get to express some of the things that have happened to them in an unconscious way.”

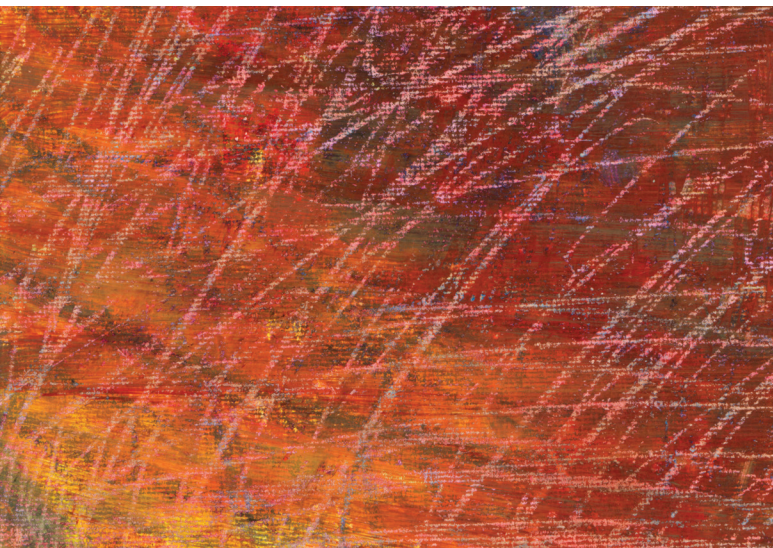
Operators of several programs say a key aspect is allowing the children to make choices about their art. This may seem basic, but for a youth population that rarely gets to make choices about simple things—such as what to eat or wear, or which activities to participate in—having the freedom to explore creative options is a big benefit.

Usually, the art programs brought to the shelters start off with structured lessons, but they do not always end that way. Pamela Morton, executive director of DrawBridge, says participants are free to veer from the path. “Ours is an expressive arts program,” she says. “The facilitator comes in with a project, and if the child at the shelter wants to opt out of the project they can do something else,” she says. Morton says facilitators and volunteers are taught to be non-judgmental and to encourage children to tell a story through their art.

Carly DeLuca, a staff teaching artist for Art Start, provides music instruction at a shelter in New York’s Chinatown. She starts with a lesson but lets the kids take it from there, with the hope that the kids will express themselves through music. Her instruction also allows for creative displays of emotion, allowing kids to take out their anger and frustration. “It’s amazing how good it can feel to bang on some drums,” she says.

The Art Start program is about creating choices, says de los Santos. “In that process we’re also achieving one of our other major goals, which is helping them realize their own voice. If they’re given choices they start to find their voice and then they learn to trust that voice.”

Free Arts of Arizona runs various art classes for children and youth ages 3 to 21.



The result can also be as simple as a self-confidence boost for children who are not accustomed to a lot of positive reinforcement. “Jenny,” another 12-year-old living in a New York City shelter, shows up faithfully to the art programs offered by Art Start. “It makes me feel good,” she says. On painting and drawing, Jenny says, “Sometimes I think mine is so ugly but then they say it looks good and I think they’re right.”

Serving the Disenfranchised

Older homeless teens and at-risk youth who are living on the streets or in precarious situations also have access to unique arts-centric programs in some cities. Pippa Arend, one of the founders and a mentor at p:ear, where Jukeboxxxe spends many hours a week, says the group’s downtown Portland facility is run like a community center, with structured classes and programs such as photography and music, as well as job training programs. The group attracts working artists as mentors, and has an on-site gallery where youths as well as professional artists can display and sell their art.

Like the shelter programs, Arend says the art at p:ear is just a means to an end. “The art is great and important, but our real goal is for these kids to develop personal relationships with others, because from that place they can move forward and mature,” she says. “Art and recreation and education are just tools for our secret mission, which is to create trust and a sense of hope for these kids.”

Sanctuary, an art center for homeless youth in Seattle, also has an ulterior motive. “We work with kids on different arts projects—for example, screen printing or performing arts—to develop a relationship and provide a safe environment where they can start to process the trauma they’ve been through, and/or just develop a sense of family and accomplishment,” says Executive Director Troy Carter.

“We’re there to say good job when someone completes a project, which seems like a simple thing but it’s a pretty big part of what we do,” Carter adds. “We do that for every kid that comes through the door.” ■

Web-extra

Homeless Youth Draw Outside the Lines of *UNCENSORED* Magazine

There is so much great art created by homeless children and youth that cannot be included in the magazine because of limited space. But, the artworks of homeless youth at p:ear in Portland, Oregon, and Sanctuary Art Center in Seattle, are too compelling not to share. Go to the Web-extra to learn more about these programs and view their online art galleries.

<http://www.ICPHusa.org/webextras/>