

Arts Center offers teens alternative

Can we still be optimistic about the future? The answer is a resounding "Yes!" And I'll tell you why. There is a place where young people congregate and it's called The Community Arts Center(CAC). "Hope" has been keeping residence there for over 30 years.

CAC describes itself as a "neighborhood institution committed to nurturing low-income children and young adults so they achieve personal and cultural growth and have a positive impact on their world through joyful experiences in the arts." It s Teen Media Program (TMP) since its inception in 1970, has served over 1,000 students who have used their experience to commence careers as artists, musicians, teachers and ultimately community leaders.

The program involves youths in video productions and also provides opportunities for monetary compensation for advanced students as part of the Genuine Productions youth-managed video enterprise. The classes present a forum for analytical and productive dialogue regarding relevant issues in their lives with a configuration designed to suit individual needs. Participants may also choose to partake in the *Do It Your Damn Self* (DIYDS) National Youth Video and Film Festival, which is orchestrated by participants who assist in curating, hosting, promoting, as well as standardizing the event.

"The Teen Media Program challenges us to think about the world around us as well as to improve our interpersonal and technical skills," said one teen. At any one time, TMP participants generate eight to ten inventive, superior quality media ventures.

Participants are expected to become versed in the importance and rationale behind artistic inventions. The program also encourages dialoguing and understanding of how media is used as a tool for social change and essentially catapulting Teens into leadership roles in their respective communities.

A youth program that really works

The program has won both local and national awards.

"Given the right environment, youths can do some amazing things. Film can be used as an organizational tool to understand your community. So our message is to stop complaining and do something," said Linwood Harper, TMP teacher.

The center is completely funded by grants and it's free of charge to the participants. It provides local Teens from Newtowne Court and Washington Elms public housing developments in Cambridge with a safe place to cultivate and aggrandize their artistic abilities.

"Young people are attracted to this program because this is a place where they are viewed as assets—as having talent to be nurtured, a vision to offer their community, and a bright future before them. And when approached with these expectations, [the] Cambridge Arts Council's youth fulfill them," said Youth Reach Program Manager H. Mark Smith of the Massachusetts Cultural Council.

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2006 DIYDS
festival
retreat.
Teens and
chaperones,
left to right:
Odney,
Dominique,
Jasmine,
Caroline,
Keisha,
Carlos,
Sergio,
Jerica, Marie
France,
David,
Joseph,
Dario, Steve
Sillari
(Community
Art Center
board
member),
and Annu
Ross
(Festival
Coordinator).
[photo
courtesy
CAC/TMP]

The DIYDS National Youth Video and Film Festival is a staple of the Cambridge Arts Center and the Teen Media Program. TMP contributors curate and host the festival, which features 20 short videos chosen among 100 submissions from around the country, and even Africa, Brazil, and the UK.

Some of the criteria for acceptance are integrity of message, clarity of message and meeting the mission of the festival, which is to raise social consciousness.

"I am a newbie," proclaims festival coordinator Annu Ross. "I'm having fun and I hope all the kids are too. In organizing this festival, I am trying to bring in a new element and I hope that they welcome it."

Youth producer and festival assistant Charnee Green, who describes herself as "the link between the Adults and the Teens," said that she's been at CAC for 10 years beginning at age of 10. She produces music videos, Public Service Announcements, movies and also writes scripts.

"I grew up here," says Green. "If the center weren't here, I wouldn't be the person I am today."

"Having the arts is the greatest thing they could have. Kids are in a place where they are in structured activities. In my neighborhood, kids are constantly exposed to gun violence. They shouldn't have to go through that, especially being so young."

Sandra Furey Gaither, who was born and raised in Boston and whose work was recognized by President Clinton, was the Center's first black executive director. She said, "I want to create a new mission to endow more art, approach things in an interdisciplinary way, to expand on what's already been accomplished... raise more money for [the arts]."

"Art has been cut from the schools," she added. "We are it."

Not for the weak hearted

This year's DIYDS festival, its eleventh, was a colossal success. It began with a screening of Spike Lee's *Do The Right Thing*, followed by a panel discussion of scholars and teen and adult filmmakers. The audience was invited to participate.

Lee's film was used as a prototype to help launch the festival, which immediately followed. As in the movie, social responsibility was at the core of the discussion. One panel member commented that "Race is a conceptual idea" and that we shouldn't let it get in the way of us getting along with one another.

"The most that any artist can do is to raise questions. The most important thing is to get the audience to debate amongst themselves," said Professor Robes Pierre, a Haitian-Italian-American who teaches film at Emerson. And there were plenty of questions up for discussion, which kept the audience thoroughly engaged.

The festival itself was not for the weak hearted since it dealt with a plethora of hard hitting subject matters. Contemporary themes like a young black girl's struggle to accept herself in a society that validates light skinned blacks vs. dark skinned blacks in "A Girl Like Me," which won the Best Documentary Film Award for depth of content and narrative construction.

A study of very young black children was cited. When given a choice between a white doll versus a black doll, 15 out of 20 chose the white doll. And when they were asked which was the good doll and which was the bad, they chose the black doll as the bad doll, which had the audience gasping in shock!

Some of the other themes were: challenging media stereotypes, exploring ones cultural heritage, what it means to be a man, staying in school, body image issues, racial injustice in the prison system, a young woman's obsession with perfection, teen pregnancy, and finally President Bush as "The ultimate weapon of mass destruction," which had the audience clapping feverishly!

The rapid-fire, Ritalin-paced festival seemingly jolted the social consciousness of all present. The question and answer session afterwards was as energetic and inquisitive as the teens themselves.

A comment about the 2005 festival adequately reflects the 2006 festival as well: "Excellent reel and true! The creative energy of these pieces put mainstream American media to shame! I've seen the future of American Media... there is hope!" Another onlooker was "shocked at how angry these kids are...." One of the Teen producers proclaimed that he makes films because he is "...outraged about what's going on and the fact that a lot of my peers aren't paying close enough attention due to mechanical distractions."

I walked out of the theater in a stupor at the level of artistic splendor resonating from the souls of these amazing young people. When I overheard a woman say, "The world is in good hands," I had to wholeheartedly agree.

For further inquiries regarding the Community Art Center and it's Teen Media Program or to make

donations please call (617) 868-7100 and www.communityartcenter.org.