

Art angels

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The organizers and volunteers at the Distillery Arts Outreach (DAO) program understand the role art plays in children's development, especially underprivileged ones.

"(The program) aims to provide an engaging arts education experience for kids who may not normally see something like that, people from social or economic under-served communities," says Amy Barnes, site co-ordinator for DAO.

"We're giving them the same opportunities that all children have, and all children deserve to have, to be introduced to art, artists and art mediums because we believe it is an integral part of human development, especially at a young age."

The program, which was jointly created in 2004 by Inner City Angels, Mariposa in the Schools and Prologue to the Performing Arts, provides children in Grades 4 and 5 an opportunity to work directly with artists in an engaging and supportive environment at no cost. The project targets priority communities in Toronto and has just begun working with their ninth school at Alexander Muir/Gladstone Public School.

For eight consecutive Saturdays leading up to a final showcase, the kids are exposed to different kinds of artistic media, such as visual arts and dance, and get to work directly with artists and teacher candidates from York University in a two-to-one ratio. The next showcase will be at Alexander Muir/Gladstone on April 3 at 7 p.m.

"(The children) often comment that they would rather be there than at home on a Saturday. Can you imagine?" says Jane Howard-Baker, executive director of Inner City Angels.

Many of the students also come from immigrant families or are new Canadians themselves, and many arrive at the program with English as a second language, if at all.

"Art breaks down barriers between languages, and you have a lot of new immigrants to Canada in inner-city schools, which is where we're always at, so there's always some language barriers or behavioural scenarios that we deal with. But we accept everyone and anyone into the project — anyone who's dedicated to committing for eight Saturdays," says Barnes.

She discussed the progress of one student in particular who was a Cantonese-speaking new immigrant coming from an ESL class.

"He really was able to feel confident and relaxed with a lot of the musical and dance work that we did, that he really opened up and tried to speak a lot more English with his peers," says Barnes.

For children like this, as well as countless others, DAO is proving to be a positive influence. In every neighbourhood it has been a part of, the program is providing a venue for children to gain confidence, new skills and a place to learn about the power of artistic expression.

