



Giving creativity a stage

Saturday arts program teaches kids through song, dance and theatre crafts

Project targets students from 'at risk' neighbourhoods, *Nicholas Keung* writes

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Dec. 19, 2005. 01:00 AM

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IMMIGRATION/DIVERSITY REPORTER

For eight weeks this fall, 11-year-old Safiya Smith has given up her Saturday free time to go to her Malvern school. But not for math and reading, exactly. She's been helping to re-create tribal life in a cave.

A Grade 6 student at Emily Carr Public School, Safiya doesn't mind all the hard work it's taken to learn the crafts of the stage — creating drums, costumes, backdrops, dance, music and story — and the even more precious skill of being a team player.

"I'd have spent my time playing in front of my computer doing the same thing over and over again. It is so dull," she says matter-of-factly. "Now, my Saturday is so much fun. I get to learn something new every week and have fun with my friends."

Today, it all culminates in a 2 p.m. matinee for her peers and a 7 p.m. variety show for the Malvern community, where Safiya and 26 of her classmates will strut their stuff in *The Cave* — the fruit of an innovative arts project for kids in neighbourhoods often dubbed "at risk."

A response to Mayor David Miller's call for neighbourhood safety initiatives for youth, Distillery Arts Outreach brings together visual and performing artists, York University teaching students and retired teachers in a unique program for children who ordinarily couldn't afford training in the arts.

"They learn literacy by writing songs and stories, and they learn math by reading notes in music and composing, or by drawing in perspectives and dimensions," explains Jane Howard Baker, executive director of Inner City Angels, which together with Prologue to the Performing Arts founded the outreach program.

"They are also learning other soft skills without realizing it. And one of our goals is to give these kids the opportunity to have a meaningful creative arts journey."

The weekly, day-long program was offered to Grade 5 and 6 students at Emily Carr and Regent Park's Market Lane Public School this fall and will be expanded to the Jane-Finch community next September.

It's made possible by three-year funding from the Ontario Trillium Foundation, Kiwanis Club of Toronto and Toronto District School Board.

Safiya's mother, registered nurse Karlene Smith, puts a high value on extracurricular programs in arts or sports.

"Not only do they help keep youth off the street, they help these kids discover the talents that they don't know they have," says the single mother of four.

"These kids do have talents and they all have something to give. I went with Safiya one Saturday and saw her working with others, through the window. I saw how much she enjoyed being there, writing, reading, singing and dancing."

The eight-week program, which costs a total of \$25,000 to run per site, would have been out of reach for parents like Rosanna Khan, who notes the progress her son, Anthony Peralta, made.

The 10-year-old boy, along with his younger twin sister and brother, has loved acting since he was a toddler. But his family, on social assistance, could never spare the money to pay for an arts program like this.

"He came home after the first class and said, 'It's hard work, Mom, but I wouldn't mind going back every day,'" says Khan, a single mother who often turns to a food bank for help.

Kids participating in the program, mostly from low-income immigrant families, often struggle academically because of problems at home, says Market Lane principal David Crichton.

"We'd like them to transfer this positive experience into their academic learning."

Music composer Edgardo Moreno, one of 10 culturally diverse artists hired for the project, says he's worked with youth before, but his class from Emily Carr is one of the most committed he's seen.

"I grew up in Lawrence Heights with similar dynamics — a low-income, working-class, at-risk neighbourhood. I had expected a couple of problematic kids," the Chilean-born artist confesses.

"But I've never had that trouble. You see how hard they try. These kids just find a way to channel their talents and put them into something positive."

In *The Castle*, Anthony and his Regent Park classmates played princes and princesses who battled invaders to create a new world for their people.

"There were a phoenix and a beautiful butterfly rising in the new world. It's full of peace and happiness," the Grade 5 student recalls of that show, which wrapped up last Monday.

Above his bed, he has pinned a card he got at the end of the arts program. "I want to wake up every morning and look at the card, praying that I could be in another program like this," Anthony says. "I want to go back."

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