

Learning infused with arts



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Note: This article has been edited to add some information not previously published.

Day by day since the first week of school, the plain concrete front of Market Lane Public School has taken on the faces of the people within.

With the help of Inner City Angels and shards of colourful tile, students and teachers have created a mural of mosaic self-portraits that signals a bold new arts focus within.

"It wasn't that hard – and we got the fun job of smashing tile with big hammers," said 8-year-old Emily Riff, a Grade 3 student at this downtown school near Sherbourne and Front Sts.

The school is ranked among the most needy in the city, but today it's launching an artistic identity often associated with more high-end neighbourhoods, with visiting artists, arts-based lessons and partnerships with big-ticket arts centres nearby.

Each class has been partnered with a professional arts group that will come in to enrich the curriculum using dance and opera, drama and art.

With the Canadian Opera Company over the back fence, Soulpepper Theatre just blocks away and the Lorraine Kimsa Theatre for Young People around the corner, it's not hard.

"And the arts won't take away from us learning reading and math," said Jacob Kay, 11, "because when we're reading scripts or writing our own musicals, we're still using language."

But this partnership needed a nudge.

For several years principal David Crichton noticed his students lived among some of the cultural landmarks of Canada, yet many of them, living on low incomes and in public housing, had never crossed the threshold.

"Many families had no idea of the arts community surrounding them, and we thought we should build up that sense of being part of that community," said Crichton, who began to reach out to cultural groups so they could get to know the students and teachers, as well as the other way around.

"We wanted the artists to help our teachers and students become more comfortable with the arts, and have that sense that they are part of this artistic community," said Crichton.

Teacher Caitland Ellis's Grade 2/3 class tackled *Hamlet* last year with the help of actors from nearby Soulpepper, who walked over to the school two mornings a week and "worked through the plot and characters and language so well with the kids, they were able to create their own version of the play," she said.

"Those were my son's favourite days – when Soulpepper came in to do drama," said Norma De Diego, mother of two sons at the school, who said she believes the arts are a basic, not a frill.

"We know music helps the understanding of math, and drama and visual art help self-expression – and after all, isn't that what literacy is about?" she asked; "Expressing yourself?"

With the sponsorship of computer software company SAS and arts organizations, the school has been able to afford field trips, as well as undertake artistic projects, including the mosaic wall, which 11-year-old Afsheen Chowdhury called "something amazing we can come back and look at all our lives."

Asha Harris has two children in the school, and hailed the new arts focus.

"The arts can sometimes be elitist and inaccessible for a lot of kids," she said, "so for that school to make this accessible is amazing."

Other arts organizations that are partners with Market Lane include Inner City Angels, Mariposa in the Schools, Prologue to the Performing Arts, Aurora Live Dance Studio, Words in Motion, SAS Software, and Impact.



RICHARD LAUTENS/TORONTO STAR

Multimedia artist Cara Resnick, of Inner City Angels, cleans off the mosaic she helped students create, while, from left, Tavaree, 8, Emily, 8, Jacob, 11, and Afsheen, 11, look on.