

Kids draw on imagination

Artists target the homeless

By JOYCE YOUNG
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Katie McDonnell's face lights up when she starts talking about her art students.

"Some of the children are very talented, and they are much more aware of world issues than lots of other children their age," she boasts.

"But the world they draw has no drugs, no guns, lots of money and a place for everyone to live. They design homes with sun, beautiful yards, smiling faces and happy families."

The art stands in sharp contrast to the real world of the artists - homeless children living in city shelters.

Three honored

McDonnell, a Park Slope resident who works at the Lower Manhattan Cultural Council, was one of three Brooklynites honored last week by the city Human Resources Administration for volunteer work in Art Start, a program for children in shelters.

Darius James, author of the novel "Negrophobia," and photographer Simon Fulford, both of Park Slope, also were honored.

Fulford and McDonnell volunteer as coordinators of the HRA-sponsored Art Start, which offers weekly classes to youngsters ages 3 through 15.

The two teach and bring in other volunteers, for workshops on everything from doll making to creating photographs without using a camera.

Varied volunteers

Novelists such as James, musicians, illustrators, muralists, poets, dancers, fashion designers, actors, video and graphic artists have participated in Art Start.

In addition, the program publishes a monthly newsletter to display the children's drawings and allow them to express their views on topics ranging from AIDS to what they would do if elected President.

Art Start began two years ago as part of the Artists Who Care program developed for HRA by Robert Bianchi, a painter and photographer.

The shelter hired Bianchi four years ago to work on its volunteer services division.



ART TUTORS Katie McDonnell (l.) and Simon Fulford, program coordinators of students in the Art Start program, and co-director Scott Rosenberg (r.) teach techniques to homeless kids.

C.J. ZUMWALT

"We wanted to give the kids a chance to experience the creative process and learn how to express themselves."

Scott Rosenberg

He quickly began organizing other artists.

Incredible resource

"It was a matter of harnessing an incredible resource in this city to reach out to people who were disenfranchised from the cultural life of the city," Bianchi said.

He helped the artists develop projects and arranged access to the shelters.

Two years ago, Scott Rosenberg, a painter and photographer, and Tenesh Webber, a photographer, approached Bianchi about working with homeless children.

"We wanted to give the kids a chance to experience the creative process and learn how to express themselves," said Rosenberg. "How to imagine what they wanted, break the project down into steps, then execute it, gaug-

ing along the way to see if they were getting what they had imagined."

Once Art Start began, other Brooklynites such as James, Fulford and McDonnell soon followed.

James volunteered after receiving a grant to complete "Negrophobia." He worked at the Catherine St. shelter for 10 weeks, helping children write and develop story boards.

"I was really impressed by them," said James, now working on a second book. "One of the things that struck me was how much potential there was that was not being tapped."

James said he was somewhat embarrassed by the HRA award because work on his second book has kept him from continuing at the shelter.

"I have learned that if I am going to criticize society be-

cause there is homelessness, I have to look at how much I'm willing to invest in solving the problem. Basically, I have learned humility," he said.

Fulford said he was drawn to Art Start after seeing an exhibit of photographs done by children who lived in shelters in Washington. Soon after, he saw an ad for Artists Who Care. He's been with Art Start ever since.

'Kids are fun'

"The kids are fun to hang out with," said the 23-year old photographer, whose first show, "Portraits of People," an exhibit of photographs of people with disabilities, is now at the New Jersey State Museum.

"Sometimes it's hard to get 20 kids in a room, shut a door and get everyone to focus. The shelter is crowded and there's a lot of noise. But I'm getting used to it," he said.

McDonnell said she went to Art Start because she was frustrated by the crime, homelessness and poverty she saw when she moved to New York from Philadelphia two years ago.

McDonnell, who paints with oils and pastels, said an

unexpected benefit of working at Art Start was getting fresh ideas for her work.

Most important to the children who attend Art Start, the program is fun.

"At school, we don't get to make things like we do here. We just draw," said 12-year old Tyasha, who resides at the Catherine St. Family Shelter.

More interesting

"And that's boring," chimed in Capella, 11. "Here we do reports on saving the world. We made a video, and a fashion designer showed me how to make costumes."

Capella said the volunteers were "very polite, and they don't scream at you like other people do."

Ideally, the girls said, Art Start would be available every day, not just Wednesdays.

Rosenberg said he and Webber are working toward that goal. They want to turn Art Start into an independent, nonprofit organization, raise funds and make the program available to more children in shelters.

Meanwhile, they welcome artists and contributions. Art Start can be reached at (212) 966-7807.