



Thanks to Art Start, all the world's a stage, even for children at the Catherine Street Shelter.

ISA BRITO

## Dancing with Attitude

Art Start helps homeless children bring creativity to the chaos of life in city shelters.

Getting the undivided attention of children at the Catherine Street Shelter is never easy. But a teacher's softly spoken warning that today's Art Start class will be canceled if participants can't settle down is all it takes to quiet the 19 children gathered in a stuffy, makeshift library on the shelter's second floor.

Emily Nussdorfer, an actress and performance artist, shepherds the children into a circle for the first of several games and exercises they will dive into during the next hour. Each child takes on the tricky task of shouting his or her own name aloud and then repeating the names of all the kids who have gone before them. It is a simple way to get to know one another as they learn about the importance of respecting each other's turn. For some, like Dan-el Padilla, a boisterous nine-year-old, it's a chance to assert one's identity, so easily lost in the facelessness that is a part of shelter life.

Next, Nussdorfer instructs the kids, ages six through 13, to get up and glide through the room—sliding, jumping and running across the floor's scratched brown tiles. Her only

rule is that they may not careen into one another—and that becomes part of the game as they dance about, carefully avoiding collisions. Nussdorfer then asks them to create shapes with their bodies and hold their poses, as four classmates pound out a rhythmic beat on makeshift drums fashioned from empty cans and jars.

"None of this is meant to make them little artists," Nussdorfer tells a visitor to the class. "That is not the point. The point is to get them stimulated."

### Only for Kids

Art Start, a three-year-old program that brings artists and homeless children together, was the brainchild of Scott Rosenberg, a visual artist, and photographer and teacher Tenesh Webber. They met while taking part in an art exhibit by and for homeless people at the Goddard-Riverside Community Center on the Upper West Side. "Other programs were devoted to adults," Rosenberg says. "People believe the kids get art in the schools. But that's not necessarily true and we wanted something that was only for kids."

Today, Art Start is an all-volunteer

organization, not yet a full-fledged nonprofit corporation, and receives little funding except for in-kind contributions from the city's Board of Education, the Department of Homeless Services and the Human Resources Administration. Technically speaking, the program is a project of the New York Foundation for the Arts, an organization that helps many small groups get off the ground by serving as a nonprofit conduit for any charitable contributions.

Currently, Art Start is run by Rosenberg, Webber and four volunteers. Approximately 100 artists have contributed their time and talents to the program, and Rosenberg estimates they have worked with more than 2,000 children since its inception.

The group has brought Joffrey Ballet dancers Peter Narbutus and Jennifer Polens, video artist Florence Ormezzano and muralist Susan Ortega, among others, to the Catherine Street Shelter to teach their crafts to children who have little access to resources many New Yorkers take for granted. Each of the classes usually takes a field trip to a museum, a theatre or another of the city's cultural centers. Rosenberg believes the opportunity to browse through the bright galleries of the Museum of Modern Art, for example, can change the way a homeless child sees the world. After visiting the museum, one group of children created their own masks.

### Few Creature Comforts

One look around the Catherine Street Shelter, just east of Chinatown, is enough to explain why these artists feel it is so important to work with homeless children. It is a massive, impersonal building, a former schoolhouse that was recently converted from a barracks-style shelter into a private-room facility with a hodgepodge of tiny rooms, one to a family. There are few creature comforts here, save for some small black-and-white televisions and the cheap cots that pass for beds.

What is less obvious is the inherent instability of shelter life and its effect on the children who reside here. Many are able to attend school only sporadically, pulled out when their families are transferred to another shelter or kept out when a mother has to spend a day dealing with the nightmarish city welfare, housing or health

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bureaucracies and can't find a way to get her child to class. Often families in the shelter system pass through several different facilities over a period of many months before they finally find a permanent place to live. That makes it difficult to keep a child in a steady situation in school.

As a result, Art Start limits each of its programs to six-week "semesters" so that, at least for a little while, the class can serve as a consistent element in a homeless child's otherwise confusing and unsettling life.

Rosenberg and Webber started small, with a few classes at the East Third Street Shelter put together with the support of the Artists Who Care program, operated by volunteers at the city's Human Resources Administration. Art Start has since moved to Catherine Street, and now runs between 50 and 60 classes there each year. Rosenberg and Webber plan to return to the newly-renovated East Third Street Shelter this month, where they will work with homeless pregnant teenagers.

#### **A Little Imagination**

On a cold November night, Emily Nussdorfer is using dance and movement techniques to bring a little imagination into the children's lives. The doors to the library are closed, shutting out the institutional world of the shelter.

In the class, Nussdorfer strives not only to teach her art form, but to help encourage the children's socializing skills. It's important not to run into each other and to be willing to watch as others create, she explains. Early in the class the children are aggressive, slamming into one another like bumper cars. But as the minutes pass the message sinks in and they begin to calm down. Nussdorfer talks about the idea of communicating with each other through little performances, and instructs them to use their bodies to spell out the words, "Eye contact." The game is meant to suggest that this is a safe space for them, explains Rosenberg. "It's a place where they can make a connection without any fear."

As a last exercise, each child picks a movement and a sound they would like to teach to someone else. Some of them are obviously inspired by rap music and hip-hop dance steps. Others, like a young girl named Melissa, imitate the grace of a jazz

dance. Whatever the movement, each is duly admired by the others in the room.

In the end, Nussdorfer asks them what they have learned. Renata talks about shapes and movement and direction. Dan-el throws in, "Eye contact." And Jesus, who has been quiet for much of the class, quietly adds, "Rules."

"It's different teaching each time," Nussdorfer says wearily when the class is over, watching the last children go back to their crowded rooms at Catherine Street. "Tonight

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was definitely a struggle. But they live in such a chaotic uncentered environment that it's hard for them to settle down."

#### **Smiling Faces**

In the final week of the class, the children will draw and write about their Art Start experiences. Rosenberg publishes a newsletter after each six-week program is finished, giving the

children an additional forum for their work.

In one of the newsletters, the children were asked to draw "Life in New York City Today." A picture on the cover depicts children yelling "Help" and the words "New York" emblazoned with scary teeth. Other pictures show children wielding guns and kids getting shot. But there are happy images as well. In one newsletter, there are drawings of children doing jetés and dancing with attitude, inspired by the performance classes taught by the Joffrey Ballet dancers. In these pictures, the children are smiling.

It's not just the children who have benefited from the Art Start experience. Nussdorfer says the class has taught her about her own craft, as well as how to teach it. "When I came here, I had a curriculum, but [I've learned] to be flexible. In that way, I've learned from the children."

For Rosenberg, the children's eagerness to come week after week has been gratifying. He recalls that when he began Art Start at the East Third Street Shelter, he got to know a couple of kids who came for a series of classes and then dropped out of sight. A few months later, they showed up at Catherine Street: "They came running down the hall, yelling, 'It's Art Start!'" he recalls. "They were so happy." That's when Rosenberg knew for certain the program was hitting home.

*Fara Warner is a reporter for BrandWeek.*