

Toronto CREW makes a difference with youth

Programs provide after-school activities for children in disadvantaged neighbourhoods

By Susan Doran

If you happen to be waiting for a train in a Toronto subway station and notice the projected image of a colourful mural on a video screen there, take a minute to consider that somewhere in the city, there's a group of teenagers who can possibly thank that mural for giving them a better shot at a decent life.

It's an unfortunate fact that opportunities to participate in the arts may be severely limited for children in disadvantaged neighbourhoods. The same goes for quality after-school programming that stimulates them and keeps them off the streets during the pivotal middle school years when they are easily led into trouble.

Statistics show that between 3 pm and 6 pm, unsupervised children and youth are more likely to engage in gang-related or delinquent behaviour, or to become victims of crime themselves.

By funding suitable programming, The Toronto branch of Canadian Real Estate Women (CREW), is making an effort to change this. CREW is an association of women (and some men) who work in commercial real estate and are committed to philanthropic pursuits that support the advancement of women in real estate and business, as well as of women's issues, education and networking.



Students work on a mural at Beverley Heights Middle School in Toronto.

By all accounts, most of the money Toronto CREW uses to fund these pursuits comes from its hugely successful annual charity golf tournament, which last year brought in \$85,000, says Toronto CREW president Barbara Bees.

"I don't know of any other association that raises this much, all for philanthropic endeavours," she says.

Toronto CREW looks to the Toronto Community Foundation – an umbrella for hundreds of community-minded organizations – to steer it towards suitable initiatives.

"We have very strict funding criteria. It's a challenge to find things that meet it," says Christina

Kobi, chair of Toronto CREW's Foundation Committee. So she was excited when an existing collaborative Toronto Community Foundation program called Beyond 3:30 (offered at eight schools in some of Toronto's poorest neighbourhoods) decided, among its other offerings, to introduce students to mural making in order to familiarize them with real-estate-related trades such as design and architecture.

"It's a good fit," says Kobi, who especially likes the fact that the focus is on public art, architecture and education, and that female architects visit the students to discuss such things as real estate, struc-

tural concerns, artistic placement and gender issues related to the arts. There's now a plan underway to show some of the completed murals on video screens on Toronto subway platforms, sharing them with millions of people daily.

The Beyond 3:30 program is offered free to participating middle school students (generally grades 7, 8, and sometimes also 6 and 9) after school on week nights. Enrolment tends to be predominantly female.

"What happens is that a professional female artist is there with the kids every session, helping them to execute their work," says Barbara Lilker, one of the architects involved. A female architect comes in at the beginning and end of the project to talk about such issues as, "how mural art can transform a space...the end result is always a permanent large-scale mural, done by students," says Lilker.

They choose mural themes (community, academics, peace, the environment and inspirational women are some that have been selected) as well as sites, in conjunction with the architect and the school principal.

Lilker says the painted murals have appeared everywhere from in corridors and auditoriums to along lockers and lunch-room walls. Some use different techniques, for

instance clay, or batik quilting on cotton panels.

"The artist is the facilitator, teaching the kids how to use the different mediums. But the kids are the artists," she says. "They have a chance to impact the quality of the spaces they inhabit; to make them better ... It's a way to empower them. That seems to excite them a lot," she says. "It's about taking pride in your environment."

In one school the basement corridor chosen for the mural was initially so dreary that students complained about getting tired just walking down it. So they decided to put a lot of movement in their mural, using vivid colours, "energy lines and silhouettes of kids moving down the hall," says Lilker.

Transformations such as these cause students to really notice and understand their school's architecture for the first time, says Julie Frost, executive artistic director for Arts for Children and Youth, a Toronto non-profit organization hired to help with the Beyond 3:30 program's mural project upon its inception last fall.

"A lot of them say the mural really brightens up the space. A lot also say they never knew they could do it," says Frost. "At first, students may say a space is too huge for a mural. But once they work together as a team they see they can achieve it." ■ REM