

Road to Success Paved with the Arts

by Swanee Hunt, Scripps Howard News Service, August 4, 2004

“If not for an art teacher who believed in kids, I wouldn’t be here today.”

So claims Bill Strickland, a successful businessman, social entrepreneur, and recipient of the MacArthur “Genius” Award for his leadership and ingenuity in the arts.

Strickland’s achievements belie his beginnings: He grew up on the streets of Pittsburgh’s North Side—among the city’s poorest and toughest neighborhoods. He says as a teenager he was “headed for death or jail.”

Strickland credits Frank Ross, his high school ceramics teacher, for helping him survive rough teenage years in the North Side. Ross became a mentor and steered him from a self-destructive path into realizing his potential for success. He instilled in Strickland a passion for art and, most important, gave him hope. The teacher’s words roused him to change: “You’re too smart to die.”

Today, as the founder, president, and chief executive of the Manchester Craftsmen’s Guild in Pittsburgh, Strickland is carrying on the work of his mentor. Since 1968, the Guild has helped kids find a creative passion and a road out of urban poverty. Last year, a stunning 95 percent of graduates from the program went on to college.

Through teaching arts—mostly ceramics, photography, and computer imaging—Strickland and the Guild help teens develop life skills. Housed in a building designed by a student of Frank Lloyd Wright, the center offers a nurturing environment infused with sunlight, an ingredient Strickland believes is key to creating a sense of safety and comfort.

And the kids respond. Attendance rates are high because they want to come to class. Students admit they sometimes hitchhike to the center after school for their art classes.

While the public schools in Strickland's neighborhood use security systems and armed guards to control violence in the hallways, the Manchester Craftsmen's Guild takes another approach: the honor system. In 21 years, the Guild hasn't experienced a single racial incident, drug bust, or instance of vandalism—nor has it installed an anti-theft system.

Strickland believes his combination of attitude and aesthetic is a recipe for respect. The center entrusts its posh facilities to its students, including expensive artwork and computer equipment. In turn, the teenagers feel responsibility for the building and encourage their friends to do the same. "For our students, it's a value to come to school," Strickland says. "The kids have figured out how to convince each other not to tear the place up."

With hope firmly planted in Pittsburgh, Strickland is now taking his arts center model to other cities around the country—and beyond. In 2002, in collaboration with Mayor Willie Brown and jazz great Herbie Hancock, he opened the Bayview Hunters Point Center for Arts and Technology, or BAYCAT, in San Francisco. Another Guild prototype was launched last fall in Cincinnati, headed by local philanthropist Lee Carter.

Though these replication projects are just beginning to blossom, Strickland remains confident that this model for bringing arts to urban youth can be sustained in any city in the world. "The Manchester Craftsmen's Guild has had too many years of positive results for it to be an accident. But you have to really invest in community, at the level where people live."

Bill Strickland knows from experience how difficult it is for inner-city teens to dig up the motivation to stay in school. He knows that real investment in the future isn't just about dollars but about the time and caring of mentors who can help these kids build self-confidence and find meaning in their lives. The Guild instructors do more than teach kids to work with clay. They mold each student's self-respect. And that's an enormous benefit not just to the teen but also to society.

In the long run, the pay-off is enormous. The kids go on to college and become productive citizens. But the pay-off is also short term as Strickland, once a disengaged kid himself, saves the lives of others by giving them hope. Any way you look at it, this investment is working.