

The Healing Arts

by Swanee Hunt, Scripps Howard News Service, November 5, 2003

Marquita has bounced around the foster care system since she was two. She's lived in ten different homes, while separated from her six siblings. When she averts her eyes and says, "Three years is a long time to stay at a place," you wonder if this sweet-faced girl has seen too much already.

The seventeen-year old carries a journal wherever she goes. She writes every day—poems or a "testimony" she shares in church. She says, "Poetry and theatre help me get to know myself." When asked what it was like growing up in foster care, she doesn't give a direct answer, as if she doesn't want to look back. She keeps to herself how lonely it was, or hurtful, or confusing. Instead she says, "It's painful for me to watch young people fail, to go down that road of destruction when they could be succeeding. I've learned so much and remained strong; I want to share that."

For all her eloquence, Marquita is not all talk. In fact, she's mostly action. With help from her public school, the Boston Arts Academy (BAA), she plans to spend four weeks showing a group of foster children how art can help them through hard times. Her motivation comes, in part, from the school's curriculum. Though tuition is free, students are asked to give back to their community. To graduate, every senior at BAA must submit a proposal for an arts project that addresses a neighborhood need. The exercise is practical, educational, and artistically challenging.

In a determined voice, Marquita says, "My goal is to teach kids in the foster care system how to thrive in the midst of their struggles, to help them understand the hand they were dealt." For her project, she'll encourage those children to write, teach them theater techniques, and help them create a play drawn from their own poetry.

The value of high schools that specialize in the arts is no secret. Houston, Los Angeles, Chicago, Seattle, New York, Denver, and Minneapolis are among the cities in the know. As for Boston, its arts school is community oriented, with deep roots. Housed in the corner of an unglamorous neighborhood, 50 percent of the students are below the poverty line. Academically, they may be average, above average, or struggling; but all share a strong desire to study the arts. Linda Nathan, the school's headmaster, says,

“We teach the arts for the same reason we teach mathematics and history. It helps us cross cultural boundaries that exist largely because of ignorance.”

Marquita transferred to the academy from a different inner-city school. “The atmosphere is better here,” she says, “Friendships are easy, and there’s less petty fighting. I hated school before. You’d go in every day with your guard up, worried about what other people think. Now, when things are bad at home, I have school to look forward to. This place has changed me. I want to succeed; and, for the first time, I believe I can.”

She had a chance recently to strut her stuff. Every year, local artists, educators, and funders gather to judge student presentations. Some 70 projects were reviewed; in the end, a handful won grants of up to \$500. Marquita described the night: her nervousness and the buzz of excitement; the judges standing in clusters, straining to hear her over other presentations, firing questions at her.

Walking down the academy’s halls is like stumbling on to the set of “Fame.” Kids dart here and there, some covered in paint, others toting instruments, and a few in tights. The energy is at a fever pitch and the feeling is contagious. The warmth among students and faculty is impressive. Not surprisingly, so is the school’s record. They have a miniscule dropout rate and noticeably improved standardized test scores. Best of all, around 95 percent of the academy’s 2002 graduating class went to college, compared to a public school national average of 62 percent.

Contemplating this success, Nathan notes that she doesn’t screen for talent. “I don’t know what ‘talent’ means,” she says. “But I know passion when I see it.” Passion has a home at her school. Many students, like Marquita, enter from extremely difficult family situations. They often have felt misunderstood and rejected, and a significant number have troubling mental health disorders. The school has professionally-led groups to deal with those problems, but Nathan is clear about her focus. “A kid may write a poem about suicide, but I’m still going to make her refine it.”