

THE KIDS' READING ROOM

Art nourishes young souls

By Jennifer James

"From the sound of the first lullaby to sight of the last sunset, the arts of life bless us beyond human measure."

— Fred Rogers, "Mister Rogers' Neighborhood"

Inner-City Arts offers painting, ceramics, theater, dance and music to grade-school students in downtown Los Angeles. This is known as the inner-city.

Inside Inner-City Arts you are greeted with spectacular high ceilings and enthusiastic human beings. When you manage to drag your eyes away from the brilliant colors of the paintings and the sculptures, you glimpse the faces of the staff of this organization and they are wreathed in smiles.

Yet this does not prepare you for the faces of the children. The third-graders troop solemnly into the art space. They are serious and orderly. This is the painting class, and they all take their places.

Arlene sits quietly at her easel.

"I thought I would never be able to do a painting," she says. "In the beginning, it was so bad. But I was surprised. You work, and it gets pretty."

Alejandro carefully molds what looks like tiny ceramic pots. But these are not to be pots. Oh, no. They will be put together to form a fierce-looking dragon.

He answers questions calmly and carefully, hardly ever glancing up from his task. He smiles shyly and says that he likes ceramics and dance classes best because they are "fun."

When asked what he wants to be when he grows up, Alejandro solemnly answers "an artist."

Inner-City Arts is the brainchild of artist Bob Bates, who is also the co-founder. He knows that the body needs food to survive. But the soul needs food too. And that is where art comes in. And he is not finished. He plans on creating a multimillion-dollar campus that will include a visual arts center, a space for animation, an outdoor teaching space and a 99-seat theater. All of this is done with private donations and government grants. Now, the school serves more than 8,000 students. The plan is to expand this program way beyond the scope of Los Angeles to the rest of the United States.

"If we could give this kind of experience to every child in the country, in 12 years we could change the world," Bates says.

And that is the stuff that dreams are made of.