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EXTREME INNER-CITY ARTS MAKEOVER

BY ERICA ZORA WRIGHTSON

Published on November 19, 2008 at 2:24am

It is a hot fall morning on Skid Row. Supply trucks hog the streets, their emergency lights blinking dimly in the bright sunlight as their drivers unload bags of sugar and grains. Puddles of trash rot in the heat, homeless people sleep amorphous and still on the uneven pavement, and in the distance, a trumpeter calls out to the neighborhood. In the courtyard of a former auto body shop on Kohler and 7th, 350 children, their teachers, parents, community leaders, celebrities and politicians gather to celebrate the grand opening of the newly renovated Inner-City Arts campus. As the kids file in, holding colorful handmade masks up to their faces, Mayor Antonio Villaraigosa offers enthusiastic high-fives like a soccer coach pumping up his team before the game.

With enough trees to qualify as a public park and beautiful new buildings, including a visual-arts complex, ceramics studios, a professional kitchen and performing arts and animation studios, this clean, white Michael Maltzan-designed facility will provide arts classes for 16,000 students from LAUSD schools that lack adequate arts-education programs. Founded in 1989 by Bob Bates and Irwin Jaeger, Inner-City Arts was created to provide arts education at a time when LAUSD had eliminated a majority of its arts programs due to budget cuts. "We know that arts education improves academic achievement," says board member and donor Monica Rosenthal, who, in her spare time, plays Amy MacDougall-Barone on Everybody Loves Raymond. "Arts education is indispensable if no child is to be left behind."

Standing center stage, Villaraigosa tells the audience that he identifies with Inner-City Arts participants, 90 percent of whom are Latino and fall below the poverty line. "Sometimes you see me from time to time challenge those who love to say that this is a city of conflict, that this is a city of racial animosity. I don't buy it, and I don't live it. I say that with every one of those, there are five or 10 people willing to cross the divide that is the 405, to come on downtown and reach out to kids."

A slew of speakers follows, with "oasis of learning" and "this is the place where dreams come true" repeated enough times to make any child suspicious of the creative potential of their elders. Interest and enthusiasm are revived, however, when students and their families retreat to the various arts studios for theater, music, storytelling and dance performances. Malabar Elementary teacher Andy Herrera, who brings his 2nd-grade class to Inner-City Arts classes twice a week, says that the augmented arts curriculum plays an important role in his students' lives. "One of my students came in the other day and told me that Mr. ICE was in their neighborhood," he says, referring to Immigrations Custom Enforcement. "For some kids, that's what they are used to, it's all they see."

Okay, so maybe it is an oasis of learning: a brand-new campus in a familiar neighborhood, a safe space to explore the arts with all the materials their schools can't afford.

By noon, donors and guests stand single file, as they wait for valets to unpack their carefully stacked cars, while the children climb aboard yellow buses or grab a parent's hand to walk the few blocks back home in the now-scorching sun.

—Erica Zora Wrightson

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**ladyisdain**

"I'm a geek. A girl geek. I like the funny. If you can make me laugh and call me a pretty, pretty princess, I'm yours."

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