

A Mosaic of Change

Sketch studio brings out the best from the street

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It's a cacophony, this place.

But the colourful mosaic of noise that fills the cavernous Sketch studio tends to mean good things.

Across the room, a sewing machine whirs. A few metres away, someone plays a soft but haunting riff on the piano.

Everywhere throughout this vast 6,000-square-foot space, someone is doing something. Whether it's a painting or a puppet, a silkscreen or a song, a cabinet or a conversation, people here are building. Creating. Expressing themselves. It's a world apart from life on the streets; a place most of the participants in this program know all too well.

"We're not just making things," explains Phyllis Novak, Sketch's artistic director and founder. "We're also making change."

On any given Tuesday or Thursday afternoon, you'll find about 50 young people dropping in at the spacious King St. W. quarters of Sketch. Operating from this particular venue since 2002 (and from a much smaller location prior to that), the non-profit charity bills itself as "working arts for street-involved and homeless youth." It welcomes people from the ages of 15 through 29.

On average, a little over half of those dropping in are living rough - in shelters, shanties, or on the streets. Some have endured trauma or abusive situations; others have wrestled with problems of addiction and mental health (often the cause or effect of living on the streets). And there are some participants who walk through the door simply tired, cold and hungry.

"People who live in at-risk situations are not just 'burdens on society,'" explains Novak. "If we don't see their value, then we're doing them - and us - a disservice. They're resourceful, resilient survivors."

Sketch taps into all those qualities. And it does so in an unobtrusive, almost invisible way.

For starters, the space is very informal. If you want to simply come in, have a meal and be warm for a few hours, that's okay. A program staffer might say "Hi," but no one's going to ask your life story or start imposing services. The only thing Sketch asks of participants is that they keep the place respectful, free of violence and drugs.

In fact, some of the participants do seem to come just for some decent food and a respite from the streets. After finishing a bowl of chili, one young man (with a white rat peeking out from the pocket of his jacket) sits in quiet conversation with another teen in the open kitchen. Even something that simple can be progress.

But it seems that most people - even if they're not artists - eventually decide to try their hand at some form of self-expression or skill-building. And in that regard, Sketch provides an open palette. The supplies, the expertise and the encouragement are all there, whether you're interested in capturing an image or recording a tune.

In fact, the small studio they've got tucked away in the back is a popular spot. Many participants book regular "studio space" to lay down their tracks with the help of musician Mike O'Connell, a contract artist who not only runs the software but often picks up a guitar for accompaniment. Those using the studio make the most of their booking.

"I've been learning how to use my time properly," says 'Bones' - a lanky, friendly and talented hip-hop artist who spent his early years in Ethiopia before coming to Canada with his parents.

Though 27-year-old Bones has a small place to call his own these days, there were many years when he did not. That background of life on the streets - the pain, the struggles, even the friendships and joy - have given him plenty of material to work with. His first CD, *No Fixed Address*, recorded with the help of O'Connell and others, includes songs such as the evocative "Written in Prison" - a tune an agent or label might be wise to check out.

"I've sold over 500 copies on the street," Bones says. "And 95 to 98 per cent of the people that hear that music, they really like it - they feel something." His next CD, *Emergency Cheque*, has been recorded and is ready to hit the streets. In December, Bones performed in front of about 700 people at a Sketch-sponsored event produced by Lorraine Segato of Parachute Club. The crowd loved him. And the life he's talking about these days is a music career. "People coming from extraordinary circumstances need alternative forms of engagement," Novak says. "It's about engaging the whole person and figuring out who they are, what they want, where they want to go."

But a linear path - back into housing, school, stability - isn't the only measure of success. Not everyone aspires to that trajectory.

They might, however, be interested in building their skills via casual workshops with guest artists or craftspeople.

For Tanya, a 22-year-old with a long time love of jewellery-making, Sketch provides not only the space and materials she needs, but also entrepreneurial guidance.

During the summer months, Sketch acquires a permit so that Tanya and others can legally vend on Queen St. W.

It's a world apart from the approach of traditional agencies. Sketch is not in the business of trying to "rescue" youth. But it does like to help them discover possibilities.

"It's a great place, a really good idea," says Tanya. "The people that work here seem to genuinely care. It's like most of them have a passion for what they're doing."

And, from her perspective, creating and selling a product sure beats panhandling.

"I think it makes us (street-involved youth) look a lot better if you're trying to sell something you've made rather than just asking for money."

A regular at the drop-ins, Tanya has watched many other young people take their first, tentative step in the door. Usually, they head for the kitchen. But once their hunger has been sated, they start to look around. To think of possibilities.

"I see them come for the food and they end up making stuff," she says. And - when things go well - making change.

Bones rehearses with producer Johnny S. The hip hop artist, who knows the struggles of homelessness, has sold 500 copies of his first CD, No Fixed Address, on the street. Rick Eglinton toronto star Tanya concentrates on the jewellery she makes from from beads and cord. Sketch provides not only the space and materials she needs, but also entrepreneurial guidance. Rick Eglinton toronto star Tanya concentrates on the jewellery she makes from from beads and cord. Sketch provides not only the space and materials she needs, but also entrepreneurial guidance.