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Video



Sketch: Drawing on homelessness

Oct 29 Writer: Eva Tam



"Sketch provides areas to build furniture, design graphics on computers, record music, paint, and even sew clothing."

Time and time again we have been told to not judge a book by its cover. But despite our familiarity with this age-old cliché, many of us seem to forget just how damaging it is to look at someone with a closed mind. Each year, a total of 650 young people come through the doors of *Sketch*, a free Toronto art studio for street youth. These are the youth from ages 15 through 29 who experience street-involvement and homelessness. While some of these teens endured trauma in their lives, others struggled with abuse, addiction, and mental health issues. These problems are not their only concern, as they also face rejection from society on a daily basis.

It is within the walls of *Sketch* where these people feel accepted.

Although this 6,000 square foot space on King St. W. does not offer shelter or jobs, it does offer a place to create art. *Sketch* provides areas to build furniture, design graphics on computers, record music, paint, and even sew clothing. There is always food at *Sketch*, and resources are provided to street youth at no cost. Established artists even come in and run studio workshops that the youth can sign up for.

Phyllis Novak, the artistic director and founder of *Sketch*, sees that whether it is through a painting, a song, a table, a silkscreen, or even making food, people are always creating and expressing themselves. Novak believes that *Sketch* helps street youth in three main ways: *Sketch* enables them to discover themselves artistically; to build on and transfer their artistic skills to jobs, life, and leadership roles; and to increase their participation in their community. "Through [the] making of art, they can discover their place in the broader community, and in that way, reduce their isolation and the risk [of] addiction and other aspects of poverty," Novak says. *Sketch* also tries to help participants by organizing events to vend and showcase their artwork.

Novak, an actress, first saw the connection between art and overcoming poverty when she worked with street youths at a drop-in centre. She developed *Sketch* ten years ago through projects, and eventually, with the help of government grants and individual and corporate donations, Novak was able to open a small studio. *Sketch* became so popular that Novak had to move into a bigger space.

Novak admits that running an organization like *Sketch* has had its barriers. She feels

Art Scenes



Events Calendar

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that society has limited expectations and understandings of those involved in street homelessness, and thus believes that youths on the street are poor people that need to be taken care of. Novak wants to promote the idea that these homeless youth are actually creative people in the community alongside everyone else. She has faith in the young people who come to *Sketch*. "Typical participants who come here are tremendously resilient, patient, and yet impatient as well. In a sense, they are kind of longing to put their teeth into something that makes sense to them. They are people who deal really well with a lot of societal discrimination and pressures," she says. More importantly, Novak wants these participants to believe in themselves and feel proud of their accomplishments.

"Bones," a 27-year-old musician, is certainly proud of his accomplishments. Bones immigrated to Canada from Ethiopia when he was eight-years-old, and struggled with life on the streets for many years before moving into his current home. He calls his music punk rock and honest hip hop. "Being honest does not mean you act like you're driving a Benz or you killed that person. No, I'm just honest. I just came from Africa as an immigrant. It's so hard for *me* to find a job, and I [got] caught up being someone I'm not and trying to hang with the wrong crowd," says Bones. With the help of contract artist Mike O'Connell running the software in *Sketch*, Bones was able to record two CDs - "No Fixed Address" and "Emergency Check." His CDs have already been distributed to hundreds of people and are receiving strong responses. "When people hear it, [they] just feel emotional," Bones says. Bones is not looking for profit by making these CDs; he just wants to be heard.

Shara Mohamed, 23, has definitely come a long way; from being homeless four years ago, to having her own apartment and enrolling herself at *Humber College* for Integrated Media today. She found out about *Sketch* through a flier. "There isn't a place available where you can just make art. Personally, I think making art is a very therapeutic thing. You can sort out your problems through art," Mohamed says. Mohamed came to *Sketch* regularly and practiced textiles through clothes and dolls. The practice from within *Sketch* helped her make twenty-one dolls for a storytelling performance at the *University of Toronto's* Harthouse back in June.

However, the accomplishments do not always mean following a linear path of creating art, building leadership skills, going back to school, and finding a job. "How you define success is pretty subjective and we don't define it in the mainstream ways here. It could mean that somebody feels safe and that they could look someone in the [eyes] when they are talking. It could mean that they can cook meals for themselves on a daily basis. It could be that they could be connected to someone else. [Or] that they can create a project on their own," Novak explains. Garry Wood, 27, is one of the many youths who made projects on their own. He found out about *Sketch* through friends and, since then, he has used *Sketch's* resources to design shirts, make music, draw, and paint on canvases. He has no fixed future goal-he just wants to help people out and make art for as long as he can.

These drop-ins do not strive for accomplishments; it is the feelings of acceptance and security that they seek. "You can just come to this environment, and you can be yourself, and you don't have to pretend to be something else," said 25-year-old, Shawnie Burgess, who started coming to *Sketch* two years ago. "I just like the staff here because they give you a homely feeling and you can talk to them when you are feeling down or have issues. They are going to listen to you with an open mind. There are no judgmental people," he says. While he is still on the street, Burgess aims to eventually be in housing. He is currently in the process of putting together a reggae CD. Although music is his priority, at *Sketch* he has also found a love for silk screening. "My future goal is to sing and continue with silk screening. I [have] made more than a hundred [silk screens]. Some of them I wear, and I'm starting to get to the stage where I'm able to sell them," says Burgess.

People like Bones, Mohamed, and Burgess prove that *Sketch* is a formula that works. "*Sketch* is a growing movement that is happening all across Canada. [*Sketch* helps to answer questions and solve] problems that we have about traditional youth engagement; [questions] that continue to keep youth in a powerless place," Novak says. *Sketch* works because the youths who come in can express themselves through other mediums, and are also encouraged, accepted, and respected by their peers around them. In here, no one would ever judge them without actually knowing what they are really about. "*Sketch* is our own little world, our own little space, our own galaxy...I know I'm safe here," Bones says.

 Yes No

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For more information on *Sketch*, visit: www.sketch.ca

Designer: Alexandra Pokras

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In motivating people, you've got to engage their minds and their hearts. I motivate people, I hope, by example - and perhaps by excitement, by having productive ideas to make others feel involved.

Rupert Murdoch

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