



The play's the thing

Innovative ASU ArtsWork partnership gives homeless youth a voice

By Oriana Parker

**IT'S TOUGH TO BE A TEENAGER.
IT'S EVEN TOUGHER TO BE A HOMELESS TEENAGER.**

Hundreds of homeless youth roam the Valley's streets. The reasons for their dislocation vary from being the victim of family upheaval and abuse to suffering the after-effects of the currently convulsing economy. These youth sleep outdoors and often go hungry.

When they're encountered on the street, many ignore or shun them. However, it's a different story at 902 N. Fifth Street in Phoenix, where the Tumbleweed Center for Youth Development operates a drop in center, one where ASU faculty members and graduate students are eager to facilitate their discovery of the transformative power of the arts.

The partnership, known as ArtsWork: The Kax Herberger Center for Children and the Arts, is a program of the Herberger Institute of Design and the Arts. ArtsWork has collaborated with the School of Theatre and Film to help young Tumbleweed clients participate in gallery shows, collaborative video storytelling and, for the last two years, plays that have become an integral part of the Phoenix Fringe Festival.

The partnership changes everyone involved—most especially the youth, say ASU participants. “We give an invisible segment of our population a voice and treat them as individuals,” stresses Roger Bedard, Evelyn Smith Family Endowed Professor of Theatre at ASU and director of ArtsWork.



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MFA candidate Sarah Sullivan helped Tumbleweed youths create a play, "Live Out Loud."

"Instead of seeing young people as deficits or problems to be solved, we acknowledge them as individuals with important information, skills and knowledge," adds Associate Professor Stephani Woodson, a specialist in community-based arts for the School of Theatre and Film.

EXPLODING STEREOTYPES ON STAGE

As part of her 2009-2010 residency program at Tumbleweed's drop-in center, MFA candidate Sarah Sullivan helped Tumbleweed youths create a play, "Live Out Loud." Under Sullivan's direction, six cast members worked on the play from start to finish: auditioning for parts, co-writing the play, and performing it at Mesa Community College and The Learning Center, as well as the Phoenix Fringe Festival.

"They were absolutely passionate about this play every step of the way," stressed Steven Serrano, program manager at Tumbleweed's Phoenix Drop In Center.

While the play addresses loss ("I am from somewhere that is lost, confused and had no love in sight") hope is also voiced ("At times I felt I was in the gutter, only to dream of being the

brightest in a clan of eleven"). Humor is another important element. Sullivan said the cast members worked hard to bring out the play's amusing aspects.

"The cast expressed surprise at how much laughter there was from the audience," she said.

Sullivan said projects such as "Live Out Loud" help those involved develop important life skills that can serve them well in the future. For instance, the show's performers had to show up on time and work collaboratively with others, which encouraged both a sense of responsibility and personal interaction. Woodson said performing the play represented a turning point for some youth.

"For many youth, this is the first time they have really truly succeeded at something that excited them," said Woodson.

LOOKING TO THE FUTURE

The partnership between ASU's ArtsWork project and Tumbleweed is a win-win: it enriches the lives of formerly vulnerable youth, and the university gains insight into new ways of addressing a pressing social problem. Even more

exciting, there have been ripple effects for ASU graduate students, who have applied the insights they have gained to situations far removed from the Tumbleweed center.

Xanthia Walker '10 M.F.A drew upon her experiences as Tumbleweed's 2008-2009 resident artist to direct a play, "Not Too Late", based on stories of teen mothers with the El Nido Family Centers and Cornerstone Theater Company in Los Angeles. As with the Tumbleweed play she directed (entitled "The Other Side"), "Not Too Late" introduced many of its young actresses to the world of theater.

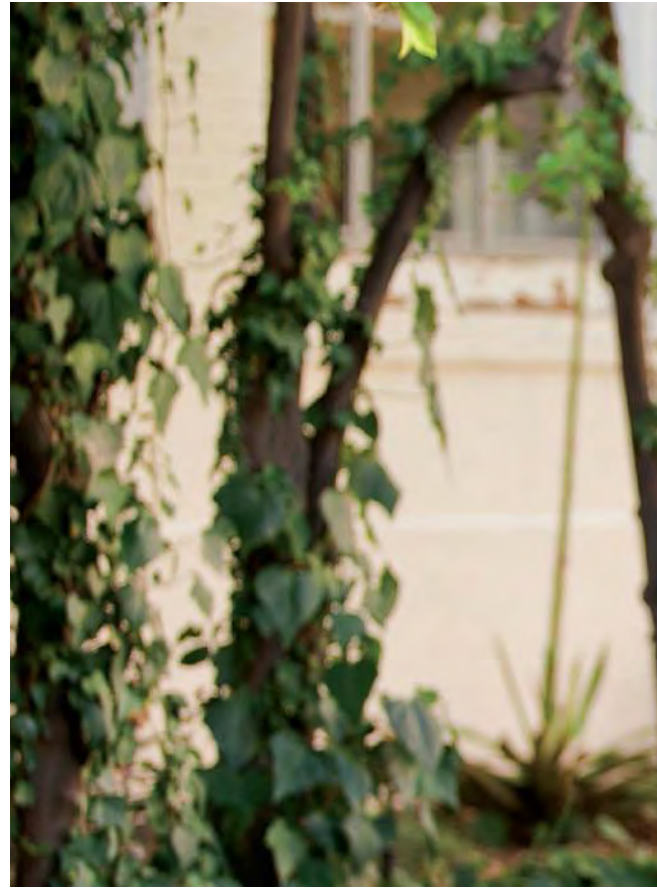
"What was strikingly similar about the two projects is that most participants were experiencing theater for the first time ever," says Walker. "Plus these young women discovered that a play can be a means to speaking their truths and finally being heard!"

Emboldened by such successes, Sullivan and Walker (who has since returned to the Valley) have co-founded a company, Rising Youth Theatre, which will create plays with and for youth and their families in the greater Phoenix area.

Thanks to a generous endowment grant from the Bank of America Charitable Foundation, the future looks very promising for the ArtsWork/Tumbleweed partnership.

"The proceeds of this grant will provide for a long-term substantial commitment to bring the arts to disadvantaged youth in central Phoenix," points out Bedard.

Oriana Parker is a freelance arts writer based in Scottsdale.





Xanthia Walker (above) used the experiences she gained directing *Tumbleweed* youth during 2008-09 to oversee a similar theater project in Los Angeles.

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