



ART from Ashes inc.

empowering youth through creative expression

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WHO WE ARE

The Mission of Art from Ashes is to empower struggling youth by providing creative programs that facilitate health and hope through expression, connection and transformation.

“I miss my brother like the earth misses peace”

– Carlos, age 14, in a poem about the shooting death of his older brother

Every day in America, children face enormous events that people of any age would find difficult to endure. For young people the emotional toll is heavy, and often suffered throughout their lives. Imagine the cavernous depth of Carlos's loss. What is our obligation to children who lose family members to violence, alcoholism, or drug addiction? What can we offer those whose lives are fractured by emotional or sexual abuse?

Since its inception in 2003, Art from Ashes (AfA) has provided poetry and creative workshops to high-risk youth, facilitating expression, connection and transformation among the most neglected and vulnerable segments of our community. Executive Director Catherine O'Neill Thorn has been conducting transformational poetry and spoken word workshops at juvenile detention facilities, treatment centers, and schools—including post-trauma workshops for Columbine High School students—since 1992. When statewide funding for youth programs was cut in 2003, Thorn was motivated to establish a nonprofit to serve struggling youth with a proven process that helps build strong interpersonal skills, encourages literacy, and empowers young people to lead confident, violence-free lives.

AfA has since provided creative workshops with more than 60 partnering organizations for more than 3,000 young people who have survived traumatic events, are victims of abuse, neglect and/or poverty, and are at risk for or engaged in destructive behaviors. Moving beyond contemporary therapeutic models and arts programming, AfA provides a forum through artistic expression for recognizing and acknowledging previous traumas; removing the barriers that isolate young people from each other, from caring adults, and from society; and allowing youth to experience health and hope rather than the expectation of further victimization.

WHAT WE DO

AfA's creative programs use right-brain techniques and cutting-edge scientific information on creativity, neurology, youth development and behavioral psychology to address risk factors among struggling young people. Studies show that factors contributing to juvenile delinquency include a lack of activities for youth that provide constructive developmental experiences; disconnect between youth and adults; and the lack of personal resiliency that results from low self-esteem/self-efficacy. Our creative workshops are focused on positive, interactive activities that are designed to promote healthy thinking and behaviors; offer an opportunity for youth to connect to adult facilitators, poets and artists, each other and the community; and survey results attest to the powerful impact of the program on self-esteem.

WHY IT WORKS

The Report on Community Based Youth Organizations by the Carnegie Foundation found that young people who are involved in after-school community arts programs:

- are 4 times more likely to have won school-wide attention for their academic achievement
- are elected to class office within their schools more than 3 times as often
- are 4 times more likely to participate in a math and science fair
- are 3 times more likely to win an award for school attendance
- are more than 4 times more likely to win an award for writing an essay or poem

Numerous studies also assert that participation in the arts promotes positive outcomes in other academic disciplines and in social development and cognitive capacity and that learning in the arts helps shape motivation, intense self-discipline, confidence and perseverance.

Our programs not only have been immensely successful in encouraging transformation and leadership in young people, but also have been enthusiastically welcomed by youth. Recent statistics of our work with youth conducted by the National Research Center have shown that of the participants surveyed, 100% of the youth enjoyed the workshops; 73% feel better about themselves; 80% cared more about the feelings of others; and 80% wanted to be more involved in their community.

HOW IT WORKS

Our Phoenix Rising poetry and spoken word program, using the 3-part process of expression, connection and transformation, helps youth articulate painful events or circumstances in their lives; provides an opportunity to release the pain and fear of those experiences among peers and mentors; and offers guided writing prompts so youth can use strong, healthy words that encourage an identity based on choice rather than victimization.

The Casting Shadows theater program facilitates expression, connection, and transformation through the power of drama and play, providing struggling youth with a safe environment in which to take risks, collaborate, and experiment with current and future conflicts through dramatic structure.

Art from Ashes is dedicated to providing creative programs to marginalized youth, many of who have been wounded by abuse, neglect or societal abandonment. Despite the apparent disconnection with society and often with their families, it is our experience that young people maintain an awareness that what they think and feel is important and must be shared. But if young people have been consistently devalued, they can end up alone, angry and with feelings of worthlessness. This helplessness and isolation can lead to violence, criminal acts, "lack of conscience," high-risk sexual behaviors, and substance abuse.

Rather than declaring the behavior of struggling youth an outrage and filling our correctional institutions with discarded young lives, supporting creative programs is a positive and vastly more effective approach. The best way we can show our commitment to youth is to empower them to live healthy and productive lives. If young people feel heard and respected, if they develop a sense of self that is not based on the messages of failure they have received, and if they can relate to the struggles and dreams of others, they can begin to create a positive future for themselves and for their communities.

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