



ARTreach: Encouraging Expression in Las Vegas' Naked City Neighborhood

Briana Mackey

At first glance, the Naked City neighborhood of Las Vegas may seem like ground too barren to raise a crop of poets. In the vacant lots, the dry wind blows trash around. The houses are ramshackle, with screen doors hanging askew. Most of the windows are barred, and some are pocked with bullet holes. The walls are tagged with graffiti, much of it gang-related. When drug deals go bad, gunshots echo on the streets at night.

The city has tried to rename the neighborhood a couple times—Meadows Village, Northern Strip, Gateway District—but as a descriptor, the name Naked City has been hard to shake.

Of the roughly 3,700 people who call this neighborhood home, half are foreign-born immigrants, and a third do not speak English well or at all. A third of the residents live below the poverty line. Fewer than half the children who enter high school will graduate.

“These kids have some very rough lives,” says Briana Mackey, who works at Casa de Luz, a small church doing missionary work in the neighborhood. “Hunger and poverty are all over the place. Many of them are drawn into gangs. And there’s also sexual abuse, broken families.”

It was against these odds that Mackey and her co-worker Laura Chapel put a radical idea to the test: the belief that art can help people transcend their circumstances and provide them with hope for a better tomorrow. They developed a program called ARTreach to expose youth from the neighborhood to new ways of expressing their emotions and encourage them to explore and develop new talents.

To date, ARTreach has sponsored four workshops, each about three months long, with 15 to 20 kids in each. *Cirque*, modeled after *Cirque du Soleil*, focused on acrobatics. *Stomp* was all about choreographed body percussion. In one workshop, students learned how to draw. In another, they wrote and performed their own poetry.

For each workshop, Mackey brought in mentors to work with the youth. For the poetry workshop “we had a lead artist mentor who is a local slam master, and is very well connected in that community in Las Vegas,” Mackey said. “He also brought in poets...

All of the kids had the opportunity to work with somebody they might be able to relate to.”

Mackey thinks the poetry workshop connected most deeply with the children. “It brought out the most feeling and emotional expression. We really saw so much growth in all the kids, from the start of the workshop to the end. For me, that was one of the most compelling things we’ve done.”

“They learned that their feelings actually matter, and that being vulnerable and sharing those things with other people was a way to connect more meaningfully.”

The poetry workshop ended with the young poets performing their poems for an audience of nearly 100 family members and friends—brave, young voices giving shape to a chaotic world. A videographer recorded the event.

Some of the youth also worked with the videographer to record their performances outdoors in the neighborhood. In one video, posted on YouTube, a young girl clutches a chain link fence. Behind her, you can see a vacant lot, a sidewalk leading to where a house once stood, a wind-whipped bush with white blossoms. Her poem is about fire, the way it can both hurt and heal. The voice of the young girl—the notes on the YouTube page say her name is Hope—rises clear, strong, and cadenced in the desert air.

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