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Getting creative and getting real at **MyARTS**

Tonisha Alexander has the artistic touch.

Sitting astride a pottery wheel, the 17-year-old high school junior takes great pleasure in talking about her craft, ticking off details about the "pretty shapes" and "curvy designs" that are the trademarks of her often long and tedious ceramics creations. She credits much of what she's learned to professional mentors such as Rachel Euting, who observes and critiques her work a few feet away.

Yet Alexander's artistic lessons haven't been confined to the creative process. She's also learned the importance of hitting deadlines, communicating with customers, setting prices, sharing profits and running a multifaceted photo studio. One day, she hopes to become an art therapist.

So it goes at **MyARTS**, a nonprofit organization devoted to helping at-risk youths in the Kansas City area develop not only their artistic talents but their business and financial smarts. About 50 students generally ages 15 to 19 are enrolled in **MyARTS** -- short for Metropolitan Youth Arts & Technology for Students.

The goal is to boost enrollment to 70 youths, who may be at risk for reasons ranging from poverty, single-parent upbringings, or alcohol and drugs. But it also can mean students who are "not focused or not being challenged in school," said Jade Osborne, a **MyARTS** artist mentor.

The arts program, housed at 1522 Holmes St. in the shadows of downtown Kansas City, is coordinated through Jackson County's anti-drug prevention fund. It is one of the few in the country that focus on art and entrepreneurship, modeled after a groundbreaking program in Boston called Artists for Humanity.

MyARTS opened about two years ago, accelerating an effort by the prosecutor's office of Jackson County to provide a haven for teenage artists to develop their talents and self-esteem, learn about career opportunities in the art world and be paid at a higher-than-minimum-wage rate.

That's partly what drew Omar Safir, a budding photographer, to the program as one of its first students.

"Most of my friends have the average teen jobs," said Safir, 17. "I've been here two years."

The year-round program is open to high schoolers from the county, and the application process can be rigorous. About 20 percent of the applicants get rejected, Osborne said. Once enrolled, most of the teens quickly embrace the regimen, which starts with a 72-hour apprenticeship designed to measure commitment and skills.

Teens who complete the apprenticeship qualify for a paid, part-time position starting at \$7 an hour. Students also can make money by selling their art at benefit shows or by referring clients to the center for specific projects. The commissioned work, including a mural for the National Association of Basketball Coaches and T-shirts for the University of Kansas, helps pay some of the bills.

From the beginning, the students are told that "this is a workplace, not a school," said Angela Castle, **MyARTS'** director, who helped create the program. "We're trying to produce products and take the kids to a higher level."

The few students who don't understand that message either drop out or are asked to leave, Castle said.

An afternoon in the studios reveals an ethnically diverse mix of teens, dressed casually but neatly. They meet three to four days a week after school. The students quickly and quietly tackle their creations in five fully equipped studios: ceramics, photography, screen printing, painting and graphic design.

In the screen-printing studio, high schoolers Audrey Taylor and Cameron Guilfoil describe the sketchpad-to-production process for their bandannas, T-shirts and decorative creations. Nearby in another room, college freshman Angelique Plowright brushes paint onto a canvas.

Said Plowright: "I've learned how to sell, and how to talk to customers. ... I've grown a lot since I've been here."

Occasional workshops with community experts also expose the teens to business law, accounting, marketing, entrepreneurship and other topics. David Bernstein, who has helped build the Beauty Brands chain as its chief operating officer, spoke to the artists last year about developing a passion for whatever work they choose to do. "It's important for kids this age to find something they enjoy," said Bernstein.

For Castle, watching the students learn and develop over time brings deep satisfaction. "My goal is that they graduate high school and go to college, to keep them out of trouble, and to open their eyes to another world," said Castle. Artists graduate from the program once they complete high school, although those going on to college can stay on. So far, 14 of the first 17 graduates are now in college.

MyARTS has given Erika Goering options. When she entered the program about two years ago, she said she had "no confidence" in her abilities as a graphic designer. But she has learned more of the practical aspects of her craft. Now, said Goering, "instead of just fooling around, I'm actually creating products" with video and the Web.

Goering, 20, attends Longview Community College, but has been accepted to the Kansas City Art Institute this fall. Long term, she wants to run a graphic design firm. Perhaps most important, she now believes in herself.

"I'm proud now to say I'm a graphic designer," she said.