

Limelight Arts: Applying a Holistic Approach to Arts Education

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For over 100 years, community art centers have supplemented or even replaced arts education in local schools. They help to provide a place where students can learn about the arts, where the community can be enriched, and where artists can work and perform. According to Jessica Hoffman Davis of Harvard University, local community-based art centers can help sustain the arts, particularly in communities where they are marginalized (2010). Especially over the past 20 years, as arts programs in schools have become more endangered, such community centers have helped to fill in gaps.

Generally such centers have been founded for one of two purposes, either to provide classes to children or revitalization for impoverished neighborhoods, generally in school districts where arts education is most often eliminated (Strom 1999). Few, however, seem to serve entire regions or to cultivate the arts in ways that resonate with students. But at Limelight Arts in Philadelphia, a more holistic approach is evident. Limelight Arts not only fills in gaps opened up by the school system, but has created a

new way for students and communities to think about the importance of the arts.

Around the country, schools are eliminating arts education programs and relying on partnerships with outside organizations to provide such services (Castaneda and Rowe 2006). Philadelphia is certainly no exception. With nearly 150,000 students enrolled in the over 300 public and charter schools throughout Philadelphia (School District of Philadelphia 2011), and an annual budget of over \$2.7 billion (School District of Philadelphia n.d.), a minority of students are receiving a thorough arts education in school. According to the *The Philadelphia Public School Notebook*, in 2006, 119 (44%) of district-run schools do not have a vocal music teacher, 109 schools (41%) lack an art teacher, and 57 schools have neither (Davis 2006). Programs such as the Philadelphia Mural Arts Program have attempted to mitigate the decline by offering after-school programs, and other initiatives have formed in Philadelphia such as the Settlement Music School (<http://www.smsmusic.org/home.php>) and the School of Rock (<http://www.schoolofrock.com/index.php>), but have not substantially counteracted the ongoing demise of in-school arts education.

Educator and Limelight Arts President, Frank Machos noticed the decline in arts programs and sought to cultivate the arts in an innovative way. As he explains, "There were constraints within the schools' arts programs

and they weren't cohesive with pop culture. "Many programs offer a scholastic and life skills approach or teach topics like Beethoven and Picasso, but are not specifically designed to use works of artists that students may already like, such as Jay-Z or Alicia Keys. Machos is a graduate of the University of the Arts in Philadelphia and a music teacher at Grover Washington, Jr. Middle School in Philadelphia; he co-founded Limelight Arts in 2008 along with Charles Ortiz (Vice President), Avery Coffee (Treasurer), Heidi Breuer (Secretary), and Dr. Dennis Creedon, all of whom wanted to offer three things: to provide an "innovative, culturally relevant, student interest driven, world-class music and performing arts" program, to make it available for students residing within the greater Philadelphia area (not just a particular neighborhood), and to cater to an incredibly diverse population beyond what has traditionally been served by community art centers.

Limelight Arts offers programs in theater arts, dance, Latin music ensemble, and vocal and instrument instruction. To make curricula "culturally relevant," Limelight Arts makes available courses in hip hop and other musical forms that students enjoy, and the staff stay immersed in pop culture by keeping informed with what is current, listening to the radio, watching music videos, and staying up-to-date with the latest entertainment technology. Limelight Arts facilities have a digital music lab that has recording and editing equipment, band rehearsal space and equipment.

According to Machos, Limelight Arts strives to make

services "affordable and accessible to all students in Philadelphia" and to provide "a safe, yet fun environment." The organization prides itself on being able to offer state-of-the-art programs at minimal cost to the students, with most classes starting at \$10 a week for 45-minute sessions. Individualized programs, like private lessons, are still generously priced at \$25 (30 minutes) and \$45 (60 minutes) per week. Limelight Arts also prides itself on the ability to offer their programs to serve students with special needs. "As Limelight came to fruition it was a no brainer to [incorporate a program for special needs children]," Machos says. "It was rewarding to see them smile and enjoy the music. They were used to classes [that were] more clinical; we wanted a place for them to have fun and feel like they were part of a group. "

According to Machos, offering special needs children the same programs offered to the children without disabilities is an unusual innovation for community arts organizations.

So what is next for this innovative organization? Limelight Arts hopes to continue to expand its operations, and they are working with the Kendrick and Gustine recreational centers (in the Manayunk and East Falls sections of Philadelphia, respectively) to do so. Mr. Machos also hopes to offer music therapy and other programs geared to those students with special needs.

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