

Creative Expression: Why Kids Need to Be Heard

by Martha Randolph Carr

Creative expression is a powerful tool. It can be used to unlock stuffed-down emotions, spur on ambitions, or teach a child confidence. The kind of confidence they can carry out into the world no matter which direction they eventually head.

Another Richmonder using the force of creative expression to encourage personal growth is Slash Coleman, a working artist based in our area. He's what they call "a triple threat" – performance artist, musician, and writer – who has come up with a unique arts program that is developing a following in area schools.

The two-year-old program, funded by the Virginia Commission for the Arts in conjunction with

the participating schools, is called Healing Communities. The curriculum is a multi-disciplinary theater arts and creative writing program that uses writing as a tool for children to express what's going on

in their lives. The short pieces are then strung together into a cohesive new play that is blocked, staged and acted out by the children. A complete circle.

Most of Slash's kids come from worlds full of turmoil and chaos. They bonded so well with Slash that

they opened up and spoke what, at times, can be only be described as "dark truths." This artist's mission is universal and one we can all learn from: Use art to help kids access their emotions in a productive manner that they can use throughout their lives.

"I'm using art to help kids survive emotionally in the environment

they're in. I don't have to have the big answers. Even if I give these kids a respite from their lives for an hour a day that's enough," said Slash. "Change can encompass something smaller and be worthwhile. So far, giving the kids space to express has been pretty heavy. In the school day, there's just no space for them to give voice to it, and that has led to behavior problems."

The school treats the behavioral problem, but never gets down to what's really wrong. However, in Slash's program expression is encouraged; it's not always a quiet class and acting out emotions becomes a part of the lesson. Slash is able to roll with whatever happens and turn it into a learning experience for his middle school and high school aged students. The result? For these kids, focusing on academic classes becomes easier.

"He has the rare ability to not let tough kids get him down and help them to be able to express creatively," said Jennifer Howard, a ninth grade teacher from Huguenot High School. "They really listened and respected him. He's a working artist and very generous in sharing the process of his early manuscripts and pointing out the flaws. It legitimized art for the kids," she said.

Slash's program has the potential to be translated for any school, inner city or suburbs to help children unlock their voice and their potential.



Slash Coleman helps kids use writing as a tool to get in touch with feelings.