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Design students help street kids



Left to right, design student Michèle Beaudet, Emmett "Pops" Johns, Donald Lelièvre, Marlene Breton and Israel Dupuis.

Photo by Andrew Dobrowskyj

by James Stairs

March 31 was a special day for students of the Dans la rue school, as about 40 people gathered at Concordia's Visual Arts Building to view multimedia projects created with the help of members of the university's Department of Design Art.

"There's some real talent here," said Céline Dion, a painter and design teacher at Lasalle College, as she viewed the exhibition.

The Dans la rue multimedia project began in 2001 when part-time professor Israel Dupuis approached the organization with the idea of matching his third-year design students with students from the school. The idea was to show that artists can contribute to their communities and see a real impact emerge from their efforts.

Dans la rue is a community organization founded in 1988 by Father Emmett Johns that offers outreach programs to homeless youth in Montreal. The Dans la rue school, created in conjunction with the CSDM (Commission scolaire de Montréal), helps street kids earn high school diplomas.

This year, 12 Dans la rue students came to Concordia once a week. They received help with their projects from five design students in the form of creative and technical support. The atmosphere was informal, as students could direct their own art pieces.

"We never talk for more than five minutes. It's really up to them to decide how they want to proceed," Dupuis said.

He gives credit to a strong commitment by Dans la rue, Concordia and the CSDM for the success of the project. "Every week we see something new. The creations are extraordinary. These kids have real stories to tell."

Marlene Breton, 21, is a student at the Dans la rue school who had two pieces on display at the exhibition. Breton is in her second year of the program and enthusiastically praised the approach of the project. "This program has given me confidence and experience," she said. She hopes to attend Concordia one day.

"These kids have an amazing amount of talent," Johns said as he looked at the students' work. "I am really proud of them."

Johns said the exhibition provides positive exposure to the services Dans la rue provides. "A lot of the work we do is intangible. We can't really measure how many kids have stopped using drugs [as a result of the outreach programs]. This exhibition allows us to show people just what our squeegee kids are able to do."

Yvan Blanchard, a director with the CSDM, is responsible for the Dans la rue school. He sees the exhibition as a validation of the school board's commitment to alternative methods of education, and said it opens the door to more co-operative efforts between community groups and the board.

"Father Johns tells me about the enthusiasm the students have for this project," he said. "It makes me very proud to see the great work they have done."

Marianne Thibodeau teaches at Dans la rue and described the project as one of the most important at the school. She could see how it boosts the students' self-esteem. "The main goal of our school is to integrate these kids into the regular world, and this project has been a real help in achieving this target."

For more information about Dans la rue, visit their Web site at www.danslarue.com.