

MEET ME UPTOWN

Arts Program Strives to Empower Harlem Youth



Youth who reside in inner city communities are faced with many obstacles. Aside from dealing with the growing pains of being a teenager, they are confronted with crime, violence, and the perils of poverty. A local Harlem program strives to use the arts to spark conversation amongst the youth about the issues they face while living in a crime-ridden communities and how they can overcome them.

In conjunction with Chashama, [Project YEAH](#) developed the YouthArts Now Program. The six-week art program was designed to give teens in the Harlem community a platform to share their perception of the changes in their neighborhood through art. Founder of the program Roy Secord, who is a long-time Harlem resident, wanted to utilize different forms of art as avenues for the youth to address the obstacles that they face on a day-to-day basis. Secord identified a need for a program like YouthArts Now in the community. "I've actually lived in Harlem long enough where I was dodging bullets. So I've really watched the evolution of what's happened in this community," Secord told [Meet Me Uptown](#) (<http://meetmeuptown.com/>). "You can't deny cycles of poverty. A lot of people, including youth that are born into Section 8 Housing and projects, can't escape that cycle and they end up staying in those communities without a lot of opportunity for growth."

The annual summer program serves more than two dozen at-risk youth between the ages of fourteen and twenty-four-years-old. The pieces of work that are created throughout the program are used to evoke conversation about the struggles of being a teenager in an inner city community. "When we are creating our art, we're all putting messages in our work in efforts to start a conversation," said YouthArts Now Teaching Artist, Aleathia Brown. "Art provokes dialogue. By building that dialogue, you build thought, you build actions. Our front window with the artwork from the youth is a window of conversation."

The YouthArts Now Program goes far beyond art. Secord and Brown used the program as a way to develop the youth's professional skills through giving them the opportunity to discuss their artwork before a large audience. They also wanted to show those who participated in the program that there are more opportunities to succeed outside of basketball and music. "We're trying to show them that there is more out there to do than just playing basketball. There are other opportunities where you can get that same kind of revenue," said Brown.

For Secord, it's all about making the youth in the community aware of positive opportunities and helping them create their own vision for success. "I had one young Latino participant in this program last year and he wasn't going to school because his family didn't think he was ready and didn't feel like he was in a situation where he could get a good job," said Secord. "I told him about a free IT program that would provide him with a stipend and he was still hesitant to get involved. It was because nobody had allowed him to envision what his life would be like if he put forth the effort. I sat him down and asked him how would you feel if you made at least \$50K a year, had a nice apartment and car, was able to get off public assistance, and you had a job that was very well respected. After that discussion you could see the gears spinning in his head. Carlos graduated from that IT program last week with honors and the reason he did was because he had that vision."

For more information about YouthArts Now visit Chashama's [website](http://www.chashama.org/youth) (<http://www.chashama.org/youth>).

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