

I Was Hungry and You Gave Me...Art?

by Carey Clark

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Wander into Sketch and you will probably catch about 40 young people involved simultaneously in a variety of arts projects--things like painting, woodworking and making music in a 6,000-square-foot studio on King Street West in Toronto.

Providing avenues for artistic expression may still seem to some an unusual way to help homeless and street involved youth. But that is the mission of Sketch, an innovative downtown studio where young people find safety, acceptance and a chance to discover themselves.

Phyllis Novak, Sketch's founder and artistic director, says youth can be overwhelmed the first time they walk through the doors. They are greeted with a welcome and a startling array of colors, images and sounds.

"We always try to engage people by asking if they want to come and make something." But first-timers usually spend about a month soaking in the atmosphere until they develop the courage to participate.

Sketch itself was born in 1995 when Novak, then working with another Toronto mission, first saw the potential of the arts to change young people's lives. Novak believes art can hold the key to healing, resolving conflict and providing the tools youth need to start making healthy decisions in their lives. Art, she says, puts everyone on a level playing field and allows youth the freedom to express themselves in a non-threatening way. These are big steps for people who have had few if any opportunities to be heard in society. Novak believes involvement in the act of creativity puts youth in touch with the Creator, restoring their dignity and power of choice.

The community has noticed, and Sketch's programs are winning awards, including one last year from the Ontario Trillium Foundation. World Vision has chosen Sketch as one of its partners to help end child poverty in Canada.

The Christian message at Sketch is subtle, but it is there. And it gets across.

Novak tells the story of a young woman who came to the studio regularly to paint. "She would splash on all this ugly stuff and have these huge conversation. Then she was just gone for

more than two years." One day, she returned to announce she was going to Yugoslavia on a mission project. She came back to thank Novak "for the seeds you planted."

