

good news

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The Hero's Journey

Arts program aims to help at-risk CPS students graduate and prosper

By Gail Silver
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Students at the Cincinnati Arts and Technology Center climbed off their buses at Longworth Hall and marched over to a burning fire pit. One by one, they tossed little pieces of paper into the flame, clapping and cheering each other on.

They were burning their fears, a November ceremony marking the near-completion of their semester-long study of writer and philosopher Joseph Campbell's *The Hero's Journey*. All semester, these urban teens have been learning how to become the heroes of their own lives, interpreting their personal journeys as works of art, in sculpture, glass, drawing, painting and ceramics.

The Cincinnati Arts and Technology Center is a credit-recovery program that uses the arts to help mostly at-risk CPS students stay in school, graduate and become self-sufficient adults. Approximately 400 students per year, most of them not artists, come to the state-of-the-art studios at CATC to make works of art that people often want to buy at the agency's twice-annual student shows. They learn lessons that range from how to stay with a project even when they want to quit, how to prevail over difficult circumstances in their homes or neighborhoods or even, simply, that they can do things they didn't know they could.

Usually, they translate these lessons to their academic work, often improving their grades and their self-esteem, and making graduation possible.

Research has shown that the right kind of arts programming can re-engage young minds in learning, and is especially helpful to young people from lower-income neighborhoods. At CATC, 93 percent of the mostly at-risk CATC seniors wind up graduating. More than 3,000 students have been served in the agency's nine full years of operation.

Each semester, CATC introduces students to a new academic study theme. The *Hero's Journey* theme of study was introduced first to 10 CATC students who traveled to Yellowstone National Park this past summer as part of a grant-enabled CATC project. Many of the students had to conquer



Students from the Cincinnati Arts and Technology Center wrote their fears on pieces of paper and then burned them in a ceremony at the conclusion of their semester-long study of *The Hero's Journey*. PROVIDED/GAIL SILVER

first-time fears about flying, being in nature and climbing the park's highest peak.

They returned to mentor other CATC students in *Hero's Journey* lessons such as how to recognize growth opportunities, identify allies and contribute to society.

As CATC celebrates its 10th year in operation, CEO Clara Martin says the agency's staff and instructors also are using the *Hero's Journey* to reflect on the agency's own journey.

"There were many times when, just like our kids, we didn't know how we were going to overcome an obstacle, get something done, or decide what comes next," says Martin.

By 2006, for example, it was clear that the arts-based program was working, with the majority of participating students getting to the next grade or graduating.

Martin and CATC co-founder Lee Carter were concerned that many students continued to struggle after graduation. They often lacked the positive role models or basic life skills to keep a job or stay in college, said Martin.

This was "The Call," step one in *Hero's Journey* language, the challenge to which one either steps up or,

at step two, "The Threshold," lets fear and doubt take over, doing nothing.

Doing nothing would have been easy, and likely no one would have noticed. The official CATC mission involved getting the kids to graduation.

But Martin and Carter stepped up and were swept into the other stages of the *Hero's Journey*. They met with mentors, such as a Leadership Cincinnati team, which helped them to define the program. They gathered allies, such as Cincinnati Children's as the primary employer and numerous agencies and experts to create what is now a nationally recognized workforce development program, Bridging the Gap.

Bridging the Gap trains and places CATC graduates in careers where Cincinnati has identified skilled-worker shortages.

Since 2006, 56 CATC graduates have been trained for and hired into entry-level health care positions, mostly as nursing assistants at Cincinnati Children's.

"We are still on the journey," said Martin, who said at each stage of growth and expansion there are new challenges.

For example, in 2012 CATC added

a manufacturing career track designed to help fill some of the thousands of regional manufacturing jobs that remain open for lack of skilled workers, said Martin. But CATC has yet to identify a manufacturing partner to become the kind of business partner that Cincinnati Children's has been for health care jobs.

Meanwhile, 40 graduates from the 2013 Bridging the Gap class are in the process of pursuing employment or working toward a post-secondary degree – that may nearly double in one year the total number of young Cincinnati becoming economically self-sufficient through Bridging the Gap.

And the current students exhibited, and many sold, the art they created – with the *Hero's Journey* as inspiration – at CATC's annual Deck the Hall student art show.

At the November ceremony, some CATC staff members also wrote down their fears and threw them into the fire, side-by-side with the students that cold November morning. "We are all on this journey together," Martin said. ■

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