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DANS LA RUE SHOWS WHAT'S INSIDE

By Wendy Smith

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Frederick Chazoo dreams of someday directing horror movies, and he says a Concordia course bringing together design students and street youth is helping him get there.

Chazoo is a student at Montreal's Dans la rue alternative school, which helps young people on the streets earn credit toward their high school diploma. He is a completely self-taught musician. His real passion, though, is for cinema. So he was encouraged to see his work on display at Concordia late last month as part of DART 498A's fall 2008 exhibition.



Father Emmett Johns (centre) views the work produced by participants in the Dans la rue alternative school.

"It was the first time I saw I can do anything I want. I want to show everybody what I can do, the talent I have," he said.

Now in its seventh year, DART 498A-Concordia Dans la rue sends design and computation arts students out into the community to work with organizations like Dans la rue (celebrating its twentieth anniversary this month) and Desta, a centre for youth in Little Burgundy.

The Concordia students get academic credit for teaching these youth digital literacy skills. And, like Chazoo, the participants from Dans la rue and Desta come away from the course with more confidence. "It's all about getting them to feel good about themselves," said third-year design student Kerri Kenny.

"A project like this gives the youth an opportunity to realize a lifeline. It's a chance to build self-esteem," course lecturer Israel Dupuis said.

For the show, the students transformed a studio on the seventh floor of the EV Building into a swanky gallery. Graphic t-shirts hung from a clothesline along the window. Videos were projected onto two walls. Websites and digital collages, printed onto glossy paper, abounded. The atmosphere was fun, funky and casual - participants took advantage of the open mic to rap, sing and play music as students and professors schmoozed with the new artists.

"I'm really impressed," said associate professor pk langshaw, the instigator of Concordia Dans la rue. "What you see around the room is the work of young people who are here for only three months."

Dans la rue founder Father Emmett "Pops" Johns was impressed by the scale of this year's exhibition. "It seems the department [of design and computation arts] is really encouraging this."

Dave Dumouchel, who has worked as an intervention worker at Dans la rue for seven years, said the Concordia Dans la rue experience has been a positive one for the kids he works with. "Youth who didn't know art see that they can do it. It gives them something to focus on and identify with."

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For the Concordia students, it's a chance to engage with the community outside the university walls.

Dupuis likens the course to Doctors Without Borders. "It's the same philosophy — with your knowledge and your place in society, you have to give something back. The students learn that design can be done in a context other than commercial."

Said third-year design student Lysanne Picard, "It allows you to get out of that student bubble and see what happens outside the university. It's really neat because they're learning and we're learning too. We see their reality."

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