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PIERRE OBENDRAUF THE GAZETTE

Luis Calderon displays some of his art at Dans la rue's centre. Calderon is now working toward Grade 10 and 11 credits in French and math.

Concordia students are being paired with kids from Dans la rue's alternative school-program in a project that's showing positive results

Students helping street kids

KAZI STASTNA
THE GAZETTE

The downtown campus of Concordia University is a long way from the Dans la rue drop-in centre in Montreal's east end — both literally and figuratively.

But a unique course that pairs third-year university students with street kids from Dans la rue's alternative school-program is bridging the distance.

Students from the university's design art department who enroll in the three-hour weekly class Concordia Dans la rue spend the year helping troubled young adults create films, posters, computer games and other multimedia projects.

The 2003-04 class unveiled its projects last week at a vernissage at Dans la rue's Ontario St. headquarters.

Street kids, who range in age from 18 to 25, come out of the course knowing the basics of Photoshop, Flash and graphic design, but organizers hope they will also leave less intimidated by higher education.

The goal is not to solve their social problems but to build self-

confidence, said Israel Dupuis, who has taught the course for two of the three years it has existed.

"It's the step that will make them jump into the world and say 'I can trust myself. I can do it. I did this nice poster. I am capable of doing something.'"

The possibility of earning a Grade 10 or 11 credit in computer graphics or computer science means the course makes a university education more attainable on a practical level, too.

About eight out of the roughly 12 students who take the course choose to write the exams the Commission scolaire de Montréal administers at the end of the year, said Dans la rue's Marianne Thibodeau, who accompanies the students to Concordia each week.

Three of last year's students have since gone on to pursue studies in multimedia at the CEGEP and university levels. Several others who took the course in the past are continuing their schooling in other fields.

Luis Calderon had been considering cooking as career before he enrolled in the course last September and found he was

having much more fun creating a Japanimation-style computer game.

"Before, I didn't know anything about animation. I couldn't even draw by hand. The course got me interested in it, and I discovered that I had a little talent for drawing," he said.

The 24-year-old never fit into the conventional school system in his home country of Mexico and gravitated to Dans la rue's flexible program of earning

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Luis Calderon

high-school credits soon after he arrived in Montreal three years ago. Along with the design course, he is now working toward Secondary 4 and 5 credits in French and math.

Most of the students in the alternative school program have no problem learning, Thibodeau said. In fact, they consistently score higher than average on ministerial exams.

The chairperson of Concordia's design art department, P. K. Langshaw, saw some of that potential when she first hooked up students with Dans la rue.

The project started with design students riding in the Dans la rue van and collecting poetry from street kids, with which they designed a magazine.

In 2001, Langshaw formalized the co-operation by creating the full-year Concordia Dans la rue course. She convinced the dean of the faculty of fine arts, Christopher Jackson, that bringing street kids on campus to use university facilities was well suited to the school's motto of "a real education for the real world" and its mission of encouraging community involvement among its students.

On the Dans la rue students' end, the most rewarding aspect is interacting with mentors their own age, Thibodeau said.

"To get a person off the street, they have to identify with a person in mainstream society, someone they admire. If the admiration isn't there, it's not possible."

kstastna@
thegazette.canwest.com