

THE REGION

Venice Arts teaches photo and filmmaking skills to low-income students — sometimes redirecting their lives.

Bob Pool

Alfredo Estrada's mom dropped him off at a Lincoln Boulevard storefront four years ago and then waited to see what would develop.

What came out of the photo darkroom in the back of the tiny center operated by an art-education organization called Venice Arts was an enlarged life for her 11-year-old son.

The Culver City boy, a prime target for recruitment into a street gang, discovered he had an eye for artistic composition and a talent for the technical skills required for serious photography.

"I'd told my mom that, no, I'd rather just stay home and watch TV," confides Alfredo, now 15. "But she signed me up anyway. This has really changed my life a lot."

Established in 1993, Venice Arts is the same age as Alfredo. In the group's young life span, hundreds of children from low-income families on the Westside and elsewhere have learned technology-based skills in digital and conventional photography, digital filmmaking and multimedia communication.

Some of them are turning their after-school experiences into possible future careers. Alfredo is one of them.

"Maybe wedding photography," he said. "I could use film doing that. Black-and-white photography is my favorite, because you control the picture with your camera and in the darkroom, not with a computer and Photoshop."

Venice Arts has also helped give Alfredo a more positive



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HANDS-ON: Ezra Dibble, 12, left, and Carter Irwin, 11, prepare to shoot a comedy in their beginning/intermediate filmmaking class at Venice Arts, a nonprofit education center.

self-image, he said.

"Before, I'd be getting into trouble after school with my friends. I've seen some of them go off to juvie. Things have gotten out of hand, and they've gotten into trouble. I would have been with them if I wasn't here," Alfredo said.

Staff members at Venice Arts understand the pressures that many of their 400 young participants can experience. Jim Hubbard, a photojournalism instructor and the organization's creative director, started one of the first photography-based intervention programs in the 1980s in Washington, D.C.

"You watch the kids, and you see them developing skills and using their creativity and having fun doing it," said Hub-

bard, a former news photographer.

When digital photography began to replace film, Venice Arts kept its old-fashioned darkroom with enlargers and trays of chemicals so youngsters would be able to learn the art form, Hubbard said.

"Kids are interested in the hands-on art that they get from a darkroom and not a computer," said Joanne Kim, director of education for Venice Arts. "This helps them really understand what photography is."

One of Venice Arts' first students, 18-year-old Kaela Whelan, is still involved. The program motivated her to enroll in photojournalism classes at Santa Monica College, where she is pursuing a career in the field.

"I've kind of grown up here," said Whelan, who started by taking a ceramics class at age 4 and took her first photo class at age 7.

With the escalating costs of black-and-white film, printing paper and chemicals and the continuing need to update digital filmmaking equipment, Venice Arts' seven full-time staff members and two contract artists try to stretch the organization's budget. This year it totaled \$346,257.

Until now, various governmental grants had remained steady. But corporate donations have begun to fall off, forcing the nonprofit's board to rely more heavily on individual donations and gifts from private foundations.

Venice Arts is among nearly

50 organizations participating this year in The Times' Holiday Campaign, part of the Los Angeles Times Family Fund, which annually encourages readers to help charitable groups around Southern California. Venice Arts received \$20,000 from the fund this year.

"Programs like this change the lives of kids. They learn skills in a way academics can't teach them," said Liz Koravos, fundraising coordinator for Venice Arts.

"You can give money to an organization that feeds hungry people and they're still hungry tomorrow. This is an investment in the future that will pay off for years."

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