

Gusto



Young Audiences of Western New York's "M@RE" program pairs at-risk teens with artists, teachers and performers.

After 50 years, Young Audiences finds ways to stay alive

BY: [Colin Dabkowski \(mailto:colin.dabkowski@buffnews.com\)](mailto:colin.dabkowski@buffnews.com)

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On a recent weeknight in a fluorescent-lit conference room on the Central Library's main floor, a group of at-risk teens hunched over tables with black markers in their hands, inking in the panels of a comic book they had written together under the guidance of Buffalo artist Jeremy Stock.

The half-dozen teens had trudged through the snow to the Thursday night session of Young Audiences' Most-at-Risk Direct Services program, one of the recent outgrowths of the 50-year-old organization's ever-expanding mission to educate students through the arts.

The teens joked with each other throughout their collective task, shifting in their seats, lightly razzing their teacher and occasionally rolling their eyes at his instructions. The story revolved around a trio of misfit characters – a penguin, the Greek god Zeus and Jason from the "Friday the 13th" horror movies – who are about to be adopted together into a new family.

When the work was done and Stock had left, Aitina Fareed Cooke, an artist and actress who oversees the program, used the teens' behavior as a segue to talk about importance of respect. Cooke zeroed in on one teen in particular, who had a recent experience with violence.

"To some people, that would wreck their whole day," Cooke said. "I don't know what it did for you for that day."

"Nothing," the student replied. "I went ahead about my business."

"You go ahead about your business," Cooke said, trying not to seem exasperated, "but in your heart, how do you feel?"

"Like, how you gonna hit me?" the student replied. "Who is you, to hit somebody?"

Cooke recounted a harrowing story about her own experiences with abuse, using explicit details to get

the entire room's attention.

"That's devaluing," Cooke said. "What for? Did I deserve it?"

"No," the student said.

"I don't think I deserved that kind of treatment. I felt devalued," Cooke said. "So what did that do to my next day? How do you think I acted toward adults? Rude. Exactly. But when we're devalued, we feel like we have to devalue everyone else. Part of the purpose of this program is for us to feel valued. We value you."

For Young Audiences, an organization founded in 1962 as an audience-building tool for the Buffalo Philharmonic Orchestra, art is a Trojan horse for important lessons. Those lessons can be about self-respect or about geometry, about surviving a rough family life or surviving your next pop quiz.

With an ever-growing roster of major programs and initiatives across the eight counties of Western New York, 128 active teaching artists and performers who work with students in groups large and small and an annual budget of just over \$600,000, Young Audiences has never been more active in the community.

And as school budgets have shrunk and the emphasis in the classroom has shifted away from creativity and toward standardized testing and other measurable outcomes, [Young Audiences' work](http://www.buffalonews.com/20130418/Young_Audiences_auction_caps_off_a_year_of_anniversary_celebrations.html) (http://www.buffalonews.com/20130418/Young_Audiences_auction_caps_off_a_year_of_anniversary_celebrations.html) is arguably more important than it's ever been, but also more difficult.

"We have changed from where we were 50 years ago certainly, but even 25 years ago or 20 or 10 years ago," said Young Audiences Executive Director Cynnne Gaasch. "Partly it's changed because of what schools can do, what they have room for, and so we've been flexible in creating new things."

That flexibility has been part of the reason Young Audiences has survived one of the most difficult periods for local arts education groups in recent memory. For a host of complex reasons, including the recession and a decline in public and private funding, three major Buffalo-based arts education groups – Musicians United for Superior Education, the Coalition of Arts Providers for Children and the Arts in Education Institute of Western New York – have closed.

Since 2008, when the organization's budget slid from \$425,000 to about \$270,000, Young Audiences has steadily rebuilt itself and expanded its influence, pulling funding from more sources – and for more programs – than any time in its 50-year history. (Money for its at-risk teens program, for instance, comes from Erie County's mental health department.)

Those new programs include not only the program for at-risk teens, which was launched in 2013, but the rapid expansion of after-school programs and the launch of regular public programming at Canalside, the Albright-Knox Art Gallery and Old Falls Street in Niagara Falls. Through its [Arts Partners for Learning](http://aplwny.org/) (<http://aplwny.org/>) Program, Young Audiences also works with local cultural groups to match new artists and performers with schools.

Young Audiences also has received two major grants from the National Endowment for the Arts' Our Town program for a [community-based mural project on Grant Street](http://www.buffalonews.com/gusto/art/from-the-west-side-to-the-medical-campus-buffalo-welcomes-new-murals-20130815) (<http://www.buffalonews.com/gusto/art/from-the-west-side-to-the-medical-campus-buffalo-welcomes-new-murals-20130815>) in 2013 and earlier this year for an ambitious collaboration with Friends of the Buffalo Story meant to draw attention to [Buffalo's historic Ferry Street Corridor](http://buffalonews.com/life-arts/telling-the-story-of-buffalo-through-a-single-street-20141024) (<http://buffalonews.com/life-arts/telling-the-story-of-buffalo-through-a-single-street-20141024>).

All the while, as the seismic educational and economic changes of the past decade forced Young Audiences to evolve, the organization has continued to mount the sorts of school assembly performances that were its bread and butter from the time of its founding until the early 2000s.

For Gaasch, those assemblies speak both to the staying power of Young Audiences and to its continued drive to bring the arts into young lives by every means possible.

"Even in an assembly performance, those kids in the audience will have a moment of success that they might not have had in that day," Gaasch said. "A moment of beauty or lightness or just what's possible."

email: cdabkowski@buffnews.com

