

inciteinsight

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Boston Teens Take Theatre to the Streets

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Teenage participants in the City Spotlights Leadership Program.

photos courtesy of Sue Dahling Sullivan

City Spotlights Summer Leadership Program: “We Are Who We Are”

By Sue Dahling Sullivan

It was “the dog days of summer” and Boston’s City Hall Plaza was filled with tourists from every corner of the globe who were intent on exploring the city’s rich history. Thousands of people were shopping, strolling, and sightseeing until....

... they heard something ...

... and then they saw something ...

... and then they *experienced* something very special.

Business people raised their Blackberries, and tourists paused their sightseeing to snap photos—a few even joined in. Then, just as quickly as it began, the performance ended; the teenagers responsible for the spontaneous street performance

dispersed into the crowd, onlookers cheered, and daily life resumed.

This summer, Citi Performing Arts Center’s (CPAC) roaming troupe of 31 teens created a citywide wave of performance art in subway cars, parks, office buildings, churches, and shopping malls. Over 60 youth interviewed and auditioned for the City Spotlights Leadership Program, but this was not your typical summer job. As one youth exclaimed, “we were paid to learn!” Over the span of five weeks, these teens discovered their unique and creative voices and developed the confidence to proclaim loudly to over 11,000 people: “We are who we are.”

Setting the Stage

Chris Cook, the City of Boston’s acting director of Arts, Tourism, and Special Events, had been busy all spring contacting the arts community on behalf of Mayor Thomas M. Menino. The outlook for summer jobs for teens looked particularly bleak this year, with some predicting the lowest youth employment rate since World War

II. Cook, also a member of CPAC’s Education Committee, knew that CPAC did musical theatre and Shakespeare summer programs in the past, so he gave us a call.

“As the result of a strategic plan developed five years ago, our reputation for delivering unique high quality arts programs in Boston’s neighborhoods had really grown,” says Ruth Mercado-Zizzo, Citi Performing Arts Center’s director of education. “When Chris called, we knew that offering our summer teen program with some new changes could help fill community needs that were more urgent than ever.”

As we started brainstorming, our CEO, Josiah A. Spaulding, Jr., had just attended an inspiring presentation on the John S. and James L. Knight Foundation “Random Acts of Culture” initiative. Remembering that last summer’s CPAC teens had initiated a Boston Public Library flash mob, he was excited by the Random Acts of Culture program, which brought professional classical artists out of the performance halls, onto the streets, and into everyday life. At that point, we realized we had a plan: take the Knight Foundation concept in a new direction by replacing professional classical artists with teens while supersizing it as by expanding the number of performances from one to over a hundred. We also realized that this was the best summer job. Ever.

Box Office Hit

Ramona Lisa Alexander, CPAC manager of performance programs, blogged, “So far I’ve had the chance to witness firsthand the extremely talented youth that live right here in our city. Auditions for the Leadership Program were intense. Over 60 young people came to showcase their talents and, let me tell you, competition was fierce!”

After a tough selection process, we finally welcomed 31 talented teens who took part in what Alexander called “the most swaggalicious summer ever!”

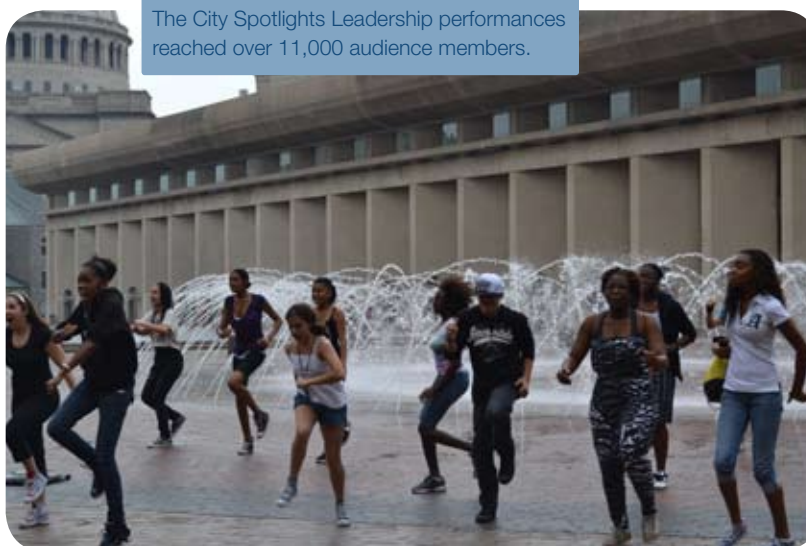
The five-week program focused on hip hop culture and street theatre as artistic themes, with weekly curriculum integrating music, dance, acting, and playwriting, with personal development and leadership training. Teens learned about DJing, MCing, graffiti, breaking, and beatboxing (happily drumming on plastic bins as their street instruments). We partnered with community organizations in youth-led sessions on cyber-bullying and healthy relationships. Teaching artists led morning yoga and staff became official mentors. The program even inspired new corporate funding support from Citibank.

The program included “Discovering your Swagger” (performing arts skills and training) which focused on character development, developing a creative voice, audition skills, and how to integrate pre-existing lyrics, poems, scenes as well as newly developed bodies of work in driving the creative process; and “Swaggalicious Confessions” (blog writing, video diaries, devising content, and rehearsals) which included script writing and journaling.

Students responded in a big way. Simone, a student with previous arts experience, blogged (*sic*):

It's great to actually know a few things because if I didn't some things would be really hard to do. Every day we'll experience something else and some will need practice, practice, practice including myself. I'm

really glad that I was included in this opportunity because it can bring me closer to my wish. I don't wish much, but to be successful. ... This is the beginning to a new journey. Just gotta keep my head up. Nothing's gonna stop. Me. Because I will be successful, have fun, feel free. And it all starts inside of me.



The City Spotlights Leadership performances reached over 11,000 audience members.

Others found growth through character exploration exercises. Teen Leader Paloma blogged (*sic*):

*The road to success: This journey is definitely exceeding my high expectations. ... We just learned a new dance ... it consists of African and Latin dancing. What I need to work on is articulating and projecting. This is a poem from the point-of-view of a character I'm working on. I am a mean cheerleader:
Stuck in la-la land.
Blind from reality.
All the poison deteriorating me.
Who should I believe.
Tell me is it better to be in the top with frenemies? Or in the middle where there is no bigotry and happiness?*

The final public performances were devised entirely by the teens—scripts, songs, and choreography—based on themes important to them. These themes and script excerpts reflect a

unique collective voice:

Theme #1 Love and Relationships: “You know that there’s one thing that heart and silence have in common—both of them can be broken ...”

Theme #2 Individuality: “I’m not who you think I am ... And you’ll never understand ...”

Theme #3 Following Your Dreams: “AMY: Well you should stay nervous because you’ve (*takes Simone’s glasses*) got a lot of competition here ... Like ... me. So you should leave before you start to embarrass yourself. SIMMONE: I’m nervous, but not nervous enough to quit...”

The teams then took their street theatre shows on the road with a simple sound system, while celebrating their newfound creative confidence in over 131 performances throughout Boston and Cambridge.

Ticket to Success

So how do we know if the program was successful? Citi Performing Arts Center uses the Balanced Scorecard that embraces ongoing evaluation against strategic objectives. In this case, it is linking “broad-based, quality, and culturally relevant programming” to education programs with “depth, breadth, and impact.” Here’s how we measured up:

Depth: The program transformed individual teens.

“One area with the most positive change is my confidence: confidence in myself. ... I accomplished a new sense of myself over the course of this program.”

—Emily

Double Feature

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"I accomplished being more open with people through the arts. ... I want people to know they shouldn't give up on their dreams."

–Jimmy

"Thank you for working with [my daughter] over the summer. She told me that she learned a lot about herself and others which is really the point. Your program has helped her with reaching out to others and learning boundaries ... thank you for helping her break out of her shell."

–Parent of teen leader

Breadth: The program reached diverse communities across the City of Boston.

- Thirty-one City Spotlights Leaders represented seven Boston neighborhoods, five surrounding towns, and 17 high schools
- Five days of performances in 19 Boston neighborhoods (plus sites in Cambridge)
- In total, 131 performances reached over 11,000 audience members

Impact: The program measurably changed teen participants.

Based on pre- and post-program evaluations, our teen leaders reported feeling more comfortable leading in groups (93%), using skills and imagination to bring something new into existence (89%), working in groups and exchanging ideas (89%), expressing themselves confidently in the classroom and in front of peers (82%), and

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The 31 teenage participants in the program performed in public arenas ranging from subway cars to shopping malls.

teaching skills to others (75%), as a result of the program.

Ushering in Change

The Summer City Spotlights Leadership Program illustrates how arts education programs need to embrace change in order to stay relevant. For us, it meant rethinking what it means to perform and how to be culturally relevant. As performers in these rapid-fire guerilla acts of art, the teen leaders became energized and inspired when transforming everyday spaces into spontaneous stages and turning unknowing bystanders into enthusiastic audience members. They invited thousands of people to engage in an arts experience outside of traditional hallowed halls, and introduced an entire city to the creative voices of our future. As the program ended, Teen Leader Ela blogged:

*Out of my comfort zone
completely unaware
of how fast the time is going by
and soon you won't be there
Now a united front, a great big family
Will our paths cross in the future?*

Will we meet again?

It's almost unreal how fast we've grown

And just as it often seems to be the case, as the students grew, we grew with them. In just one summer, these 31 teen leaders became true champions in changing how we perceive the arts—both on stage and off.

Sue Dahling Sullivan, chief of staff for Boston's Citi Performing Arts Center, is shamelessly proud of the City Spotlights Leadership Program and those who contributed to its success including Ruth Mercado-Zizzo, Ramona Lisa Alexander, Siobhan Brown, Che Madyun, Elena Damaskos, and Lexie Koss.

Incite Link: Learn more about the Knight Foundation's "Random Acts of Culture" [here](#).

Insight Link: Learn more about individual teens and the process, view our "Swaggalicious Video Diaries" produced about and by teens in Citi Performing Arts Center's program [here](#).