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Art & Soul

The Center for Creative Youth brings aspiring artists together with world-class mentors



Christopher Williams of Hartford participated in CCY's visual arts classes.

By Sarah Wesley Lemire
Photos by Vanessa Victoria Volpe

The hallowed halls of Wesleyan University grow quiet as the last of the college students head home for the summer, and graduates leave for good.

Classrooms are vacant, common meeting areas are hushed and a stillness falls over the campus as another academic year comes to a close at the distinguished liberal arts school.

But the silence is short-lived and by the end of June, the Middletown campus is once again alive with voices and bodies and it hums with unbridled energy. However, instead of undergraduates, the residents are high school students ranging in age from 14 to 18, and they've come in pursuit of their art and soul.

For five weeks, young adults from all over New England and even as far away as Indonesia come to take part in the Center for Creative Youth (CCY), a residency program of the Hartford-based Capitol Region Education Council (CREC), held at Wesleyan.

"It may sound corny, but in fact, this is the kind of program that changes kids' lives," said Nancy Wolfe, who serves as the managing director of the program.

"There are so many moments of just pure elation. It's hard to describe. It's such a gift

to be able to watch the light go off in a kid's eyes when they get an understanding and they achieve something."

For 35 years, students have been participating in CCY to connect to their art in an intense 24/7 sort of way. Encompassing theater, creative writing, visual arts, music, photography, filmmaking and dance, the program – paid for by parents or through scholarships – immerses the students in their art of choice and then complements the core classes with subjects outside of their "comfort zone." The instructors are world-class artists in their own right, who come to teach at CCY from around the globe.

Wolfe said that while students spend several hours each day focusing on their master art, they also take "mini-courses" in other disciplines to enhance and round them out as artists. "This is when we try and push them outside of their art form. [For example,] we tell a creative writer, 'Why don't you do ballroom dancing or steel pan orchestra? Go crazy and try it.'"

The belief is that true artistry is about more than pursuing a single innate ability; it's about being well rounded.

"We believe that students can't really become fine artists if they don't understand all the arts. The approach here is not for the student who wants to study ballet from 9 a.m. in the morning until 10 p.m. at night;

that's not what this program is."

In addition to classroom work, students attend performances, exhibits, films and writing presentations by performers several times a week throughout their stay. This summer, they attended performances by artists like well-known jazz group the Kenny Barron Trio and the Trey McIntyre Project, a contemporary ballet company.

Living together in dorm rooms for five weeks, the more than 130 participants also gain early insight into what future college life holds for them. Wolfe believes that because the program is residential, it helps them grow socially and emotionally as well as artistically.

To help facilitate that growth, roommates are often chosen to bunk together with their artistic and personal diversity in mind. "We try to subtly pair them with roommates who are different, allowing them to get to know other artists and art forms."

Christopher Williams is an 18-year-old senior at the Greater Hartford Academy of the Arts and a Hartford resident. He looks intently at a live model posing in the middle of the art studio on campus and, like the 30 other students in the room, he is sketching her image on his easel.

It's his fourth week in the program and the aspiring animator enthuses that during his

time in the CCY program, he's not only learned to live on his own, but has evolved as an artist. While once just solely focused on animation, he now has come to appreciate using multiple mediums and said that it has enhanced his ability.

"I learned about figure drawing; I didn't know how to do that. I've learned to use different materials, watercolors... I wasn't good at that, but I'm getting better. It was stuff I hadn't touched [before]."



Kylie Flanagan performs during an instrumental music event at CCY.

His work, like that of many others in the room, is impressive – especially when considering that he's still in high school.

But that is not uncommon for students participating in this program, according to Diana Moller-Marino, chair of the CCY theater department. She often finds herself surprised by the intensity of the students' commitment and by the depth of ability that some of them have.

The Center for Creative Youth benefits from the talents of its department heads, each of them an expert in their respective fields.

CCY Musical Theater Department Chair
Carolyn Kirsch

Faculty, Greater Hartford Academy of the Arts
She has served on the faculty of the Greater Hartford Academy of the Arts and Hartford Children's Theatre, has served as guest faculty for the Hartford Conservatory, and has appeared in 15 Broadway musicals over a 21-year period of performing in Manhattan.

CCY Theater Chair
Diana Moller-Marino

Associate theater professor at The Hartt School
Moller-Marino teaches acting with an emphasis on movement, and has been involved in actor-training programs since 1990. She has been a guest teaching artist at many U.S. universities and colleges, and at cultural centers in Santiago and Cape Verde, Africa.

CCY Creative Writing Chair
Rafael Osés

Faculty, Greater Hartford Academy of the Arts
An award-winning writer and poet, Osés has also taught courses at the University of Hartford and Saint Joseph College. His work has been performed and heard on radio all over the world.

CCY Music Chair
Gene Bozzi

Music Department Chair, Greater Hartford Academy of the Arts
The principal timpanist with the Hartford Symphony Orchestra, Bozzi also teaches college level percussion at Wesleyan University. As a jazz musician, he has worked as a sideman with many well-known recording artists.

Kim Stroud, CCY's general director, discusses the summer program with Nancy Wolfe, managing director.



"There's a range of that, and particularly with the writers because it's generated by them; you wouldn't think that someone who just turned 16 would have that insight," she said.

Wolfe agrees and said that there are always a few students each summer who have "that extra something." It's obvious that after leaving the program, they will likely continue on to bigger and better things. "Every year, there's a kid who'll walk in and you'll say, 'Oh yeah,' and you know immediately," she said.

One of those students was Doug Lyons, who attended the CCY program a few years back and has gone on to perform in such high-profile shows as *Dreamgirls*, *Rent*, and *To Kill a Mockingbird*. Lyons is currently performing in the cast of the highly acclaimed, Tony Award-winning Broadway play, *The Book of Mormon*.

It's quite possible that 17-year-old Alexis Patrick has a promising future as well. Patrick has come to participate in the program from Madison. Sitting in a classroom with about 20 vocalists who are all

singing together, her voice distinctly rises above the others and it's immediately obvious that she is one of those students who inspires the "Oh yeah," that Wolfe refers to.

"I've been singing ever since I can remember," Patrick said.

While pregnant, her mother, a professional vocalist, would put headphones on her belly to play music for her unborn daughter who, perhaps not surprisingly, is now following in her mother's footsteps.

Influenced by artists such as Jill Scott and India.Arie, she has dreams of pursuing a professional singing career and cites her mother as her true inspiration.

"It doesn't really matter if I become famous; I just love to sing. My mom had an album when she was 20 and she sings backup for people; I would be happy with that."

For Patrick, coming to CCY has proven invaluable. "This is the first time I've been away. The diversity is amazing here. I love being friends with a whole bunch of different people; it's

helped me a lot. I really needed that."

Beyond that, she's found a connection with many of her classmates and believes that all around, the experience has changed her. "It's really great to be around people who share the same kind of passion and art as you. And being around different kinds of art is amazing. I think it builds me up as an artist."

It can only help that all of the participating staff members, from the resident advisors to the teachers and even the office staff, are artists as well. It's a prerequisite, according to Wolfe.

"Everyone at CCY is a practicing artist, so we speak their language," she said. "They are surrounded by people who get them, who understand what they are going through on some level, and who can encourage the process. And I think that's what enables the kids to connect with each other and themselves."

That philosophy goes all the way to the top. The general director of the CCY program and director of the arts for the Greater Hartford



Alexis Patrick of Madison was one of the students involved in CCY's vocal music program.

Each year, the Center for Creative Youth attracts high-caliber instructors from around the world. Just a few of the renowned artists who participated in the 2011 CCY session were:

Trey McIntyre

One of the world's most sought-after choreographers, the Kansas native has created a canon of more than 80 works for companies like the American Ballet Theatre, Hubbard Street Dance Chicago, the New York City Ballet, the Stuttgart Ballet and Chile's Ballet de Santiago.

McIntyre was named the United States Artists Wynn Fellow, and his company, the Trey McIntyre Project or TMP, was featured on PBS *NewsHour* with Jim Lehrer. TMP was chosen by the U.S. Department of State and Brooklyn Academy of Music as one of four American dance companies to participate in DanceMotion USA.

Kenny Barron

Last year, Barron was described by the *Los Angeles Times* as "one of the top jazz pianists in the world. He was inducted by the National Endowment for the Arts into its prestigious Jazz Masters class, giving him a place alongside the music "greats" who have won the nation's top honor in jazz.

In 2005, Barron, a multiple Grammy nominee, was inducted into the American Jazz Hall of Fame and received the MAC Lifetime Achievement Award.

He has been a professor of music at Rutgers University for 27 years.

Marc Bamuthi Joseph

Jospeph is one of America's leading voices in performance, arts education, and artistic curation.

In 2007, he appeared on the cover of *Smithsonian Magazine* after being named one of America's Top Young Innovators in the Arts and Sciences.

The artistic director of the seven-part HBO documentary *Russell Simmons presents Brave New Voices* received the United States Artists Rockefeller Fellowship.

Academy of the Arts, Kim Stroud is a dancer. A child of the inner city, she said that it was dance that helped her break away from the constraints of urban life and because of it, she was the first person in her family to attend college. Thus she is passionate about the inherent influence of art and its ability to change lives.

Stroud became involved in the program as a guest artist in the mid-1990s and her role continued evolving until now she heads it. For her, it is a pure labor of love minus the worries that typically accompany her work during the regular school year.

"What I love about my being there is that for those five weeks, I have a pure and simple and direct goal: I get to be with young artists."

Part of that gratification comes from watching them shed their pre-ordained personas and the regular pressures associated with being teens as they allow themselves to fully focus on their art.

"You watch 'the sigh.' The moment when they realize that they've got nothing in their way to

do this thing. The road has been cleared and they just fly; they soar. You can feel the crust peeling off of them, allowing their skin to breathe again. It's pretty special."

Like the others, she sees greatness in many of those students and is amazed by their ability and potential.

Each year, she participates in mock auditions where students present an audition piece for feedback. The process helps them prepare for the future and allows them to benefit from her firsthand knowledge and experience.

"Almost every single time, there's a kid who presents something and I get to say, 'You don't even know what you have yet and I am so excited to see what happens with this.' It sends chills down your back to see someone do something innately, unconsciously... and they just have it."

Despite the program's longevity and success, both Wolfe and Stroud expressed concern for its future due to an unstable economy in which the arts are often the first casualty of budget cuts. The CCY program is not

immune to those cuts and in order to continue, said Stroud, it needs to become more self-sustaining. "I'd love to know it will exist for as long as the world needs it to exist."

To facilitate that, the program encourages students to stay involved long after they've finished their five weeks by bringing the arts to their communities. "It's important for the future of arts. In today's economy, the arts are the first to go. We teach the kids about going out into the community and helping keep the arts alive, along with their importance in our society."

"I know the power of art," said Stroud. "For a certain population, ... it is life. That's one reason why we can't lose this program. The humanity of a society is in its art; and we have to keep our humanity." **HM**



Center for Creative Youth or the Summer Arts Residency Program
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