

The Hippo: New Hampshire's Weekly: Summer 2011 Self-Expression

Summer of self-expression

AIR gives girls confidence through art



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News - This summer about 45 young women from Rockingham and Stafford counties will be empowered by the arts. This has been the mission of Arts in Reach (AIR) for 15 years and it is impacting the lives of those who participate. The organization began when two young women, just out of the University of New Hampshire, wanted to share with others their love of art, according to Leanne Stella, executive director of AIR. Kristin Forselius and Amanda Tappan loved being exposed to art in college but felt they hadn't properly had arts training before that. This was something they wanted to change for other young women, according to Stella. So Forselius and Tappan hit the pavement and were able to raise \$2,000, which was enough to fund a camp for a dozen girls. "They took art trips and went to museums but they quickly

discovered something more was going on," Stella said. What was happening was the girls (who are 13 to 18 years old, with an average age of 15) gained confidence and self-esteem quite quickly when they were exposed to both art and each other. The mission evolved from simply exposing girls to art to empowering teenage girls through mentoring and the arts. AIR now includes programs after school, during vacations and in the summer. "These are the times that teenagers could be alone and are very likely to engage in risky or unhealthy activities," Stella said. "Now they have a safe place." AIR works with about 100 girls throughout the year and each program typically has between 15 and 20 girls in it. Girls come to the program through referrals from guidance counselors, social workers and children's homes, as well as through active recruitment on behalf of AIR in schools. "Approximately 75 percent of girls are invited to participate because they demonstrate financial disadvantage (defined as being eligible to receive free or reduced price school lunch)," according to AIR's website, www.artsinreach.org. "Others have learning or emotional disabilities, suffer from eating disorders, are victims of rape or domestic assault, or are labeled 'multi-risk' by schools (that is, they have life challenges that extend beyond ubiquitous teenage difficulties)." AIR focuses on girls because over the years the organization has found a benefit for girls of this age to have a place where they can express themselves and take safe risks. As Stella said, the majority of teenage girls have issues of some kind, so she doesn't like to use the term "at-risk" to describe the girls of AIR because really all girls are at risk of something. And most would benefit from the type of positive relationships with adults that are cultivated at AIR. Stella said the girls use art to address a variety of issues. For example, many teens — of both genders — struggle with body issues and labels. Stella said the girls would talk about labels and then perform a skit in which they all had, literally, labels on them. Then each peeled the labels off another girl and said something positive about her. "It was very empowering," Stella said. Self-expression is an important aspect of the program. Stella said journal writing is incorporated into each program and she said it was helpful for girls to share their voices. During the summer, AIR has a theme. Last year it was "The Phenomenal Woman," which encouraged the girls to emphasize their individuality. This year they are bringing the spirit of community to the forefront with "The Mosaic Woman," which explores diversity and unity. The program will include guest speakers, who will be women from the region, women who have traveled the globe and women from other areas, like New York City. "This will be an opportunity for them to talk with these women about their careers," Stella said. Of course, there will also be art, and what better way to practice unity than to paint a mural? For the location of the mural, AIR got help from 3S Artspace, which is a performance space, art gallery and farm-to-table restaurant coming soon to Portsmouth. Through the assistance of 3S Artspace, AIR will be able to paint on the side of the old Frank Jones Brewery buildings along the Islington Street corridor. There will be three summer programs, each a week long, that will work with 45 girls. The first is ArtWorks, a visual arts

program led by New York City artist Marcela Carvalho in which girls will focus on paintings and other visual arts. The second program is SongWorks, where the girls will write, perform and record their own songs, and the final program is TheatreWorks, where the girls will create and perform their own theater and dance production. All of these programs will culminate in a final performance and unveiling at the mural site, 11 Jewell Court, Portsmouth, on Thursday, Aug. 18, at 6 p.m. "This is a nice part because the girls get to be recognized for the work they've done," Stella said.