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You can't mean my kid

How Inside Out uses drama to turn students around

BY JAMES PALMARINI

Inside Out teaching artist Goretí da Silva likes to tell the story about the time an artist colleague called the house of a student enrolled in the organization's after-school program, the School Project. "She got the mother on the phone," said da Silva, "and started telling her how wonderful her son, Tom, was doing in the program. And the mother interrupted her with 'Are you sure you've got the right Tom?' The artist said yes, right Tom. So the woman called off from the phone to someone else in the house, 'There's someone on the phone saying good things about Tom.' And you hear from a distance someone shouting back, 'Can't be our Tom. Must be another Tom.'"

Da Silva laughs about the story, but for her it's one of those unsurprising anecdotes that happens regularly at Inside Out Community Arts, a Venice, California organization founded in 1996 by theatre professionals Jonathan Zeichner and Camille Ameen.

It's also the kind of feel-good tale one hears repeatedly from parents, teachers, administrators, and others about how an arts experience has helped turn around students' lives—grades got better, they learned to get along, they became leaders, they gained confidence, and so on.

Anecdotal evidence that arts make a difference in children's lives is certainly valuable but it doesn't carry the weight of carefully conducted research. James Catterall's study of Inside Out's School Project, *An After-School Program in Thematic Theatre for At-Risk Students* (see page 3), offers something

experience can make a profound difference to children, particularly at-risk students with academic, behavior, and home environment problems. The study focuses on nine behavioral-skill domains. Students in the School Project demonstrated improvement in all nine areas, with the following showing the most significant change: attitudes about doing arts, metacognition (awareness of one's own thinking processes), attitudes about acting, problem resolution skills, and self-efficacy.

Studies like this one have become increasingly important in the last few years. Both after-school and curricular arts programs have been getting a closer look in light of belt-tightening brought on by the No Child Left Behind Act of 2002, which requires testing in math and reading. Subjects not included in standardized testing have been cut back or, in some cases, even

organizations, and nonprofits dedicated to offering arts experiences to children, pre-school through high school.

But Inside Out has taken its program a few steps farther. Co-directors Ameen and Zeichner realized the need several years ago for statistical data that validated their programming. They began with a project evaluation survey study in 2000, conducted by Steven Frieze, director of Institutional Research and Planning at Cal Polytechnic University, Pomona. In 2003, the organization conducted its own case study evaluation.

Inside Out has received numerous local and state awards and was recognized as a model program in the RAND report, *The Arts and Public Safety Impact Study*. Most recently, the program was among seventeen youth and humanities programs throughout the country to receive a 2005 Coming Up Taller Award, an initiative sponsored by the President's Committee on the Arts and Humanities.

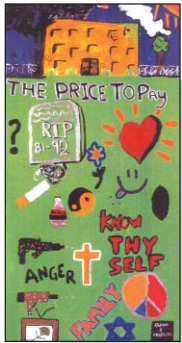
Why does Inside Out work? Here are several things that distinguish the organization:

- A commitment to diversity. Inside Out taps an ethnically mixed group of students from a broad range of socioeconomic backgrounds from very different parts of Los Angeles, and brings them together for a shared arts experience. The program also includes children who are mentally and physically challenged.

- A free semester-long theatre-based curriculum program (the School Project) that largely fulfills the California standards for English and performing arts in theatre for middle school students.

- A concerted effort to include parents of participating students in the program, through student-parent workshop sessions, personal visits, and regular phone calls that inform the parents of their child's progress.

- A broad range of programs available not only regionally, but in the Venice community as well. Besides the School Project, Inside Out also runs the Neighborhood Arts Project (a year-round program that brings together youths from rival gang areas); the



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more: the first controlled study of an after-school junior high arts program. Essentially what that means is that the study included a self-selected control group. Eighty-four of the students who signed up for the program were not admitted because of space limitations. That allowed Catterall to measure the behavioral changes in both the students who were in the program and those who were not.

Catterall's study confirmed what the anecdotal stories suggest: an arts experience

can be eliminated as schools allocate their resources toward teaching the basics. Regardless of how one might feel about the intrinsic worth of arts programs for children, offering quantitative evidence confirming their impact is valuable and necessary ammunition in any effort to create and maintain the program.

In many ways, Inside Out is not unique. Do an online search of "after-school arts" and you'll encounter dozens of programs sponsored by community centers, schools, professional arts

Allen Young School at Metropolitan State Hospital (for children with severe mental and emotional problems); and Spectrum (for high school students with Asperger's Syndrome, a form of autism). Inside Out also provides services at StarView (a program for formerly incarcerated, institutionalized, or abused children).

- A comprehensive training program for teaching artists (including actors, painters, dancers, musicians and other arts professionals) that includes step-by-step reviews of curriculum, site visits with other working artists, and training in methodology, intervention techniques, and assessment.

- A mentoring program that folds former students back into the program as volunteers and in paid positions during their high school years.

- A solid coalition of local and national corporate and grant support. Inside Out receives funding from Starbucks, the Wells Fargo Foundation, the LA Department of Cultural Affairs, Target, Turner Broadcasting, the National Endowment for the Arts, and the Los Angeles County Arts Commission, among many other businesses and private foundations.

Teaching Theatre talked to Zeichner and Ameen, along with two teaching artists and three former Inside Out students last May on the eve of the School Project's culminating event: a presentation in a theatre on the University of Southern California campus of nine plays created and performed by the roughly one hundred students who had spent several months working in the program. The audience would include around five hundred friends, family, and anyone else who had an interest in finding out just what the kids had been up to during those after-school sessions.

To understand how Inside Out's students got to that point, one needs to examine how the organization became the successful arts outreach effort that it is, and how the people involved make it all work.

The beginning of something

Ameen and Zeichner began Inside Out in 1996, after working for several years



In rehearsal: students at Inside Out's 2005 Theatre Project campout in the Santa Monica Mountains.

with the Imagination Workshop, a UCLA-based outreach organization that did theatre workshops with the mental health and homeless communities in the area.

Both had come to Los Angeles for the same reason most professionally trained actors do: to be near the action hoping to further their careers. Ameen has an extensive acting resume. She's been in over ninety professional plays, including on Broadway with James Earl Jones and Christopher Plummer, and has worked regularly in TV. Zeichner is a classically trained actor, director, and screenwriter who has worked in film, theatre, and television.

Each said that, at the end of the day, the satisfaction and financial rewards of the performing, directing, and writing they were doing was not enough. The rewards of doing outreach work far exceeded the satisfaction of working in professional performing arts situations, according to Ameen and Zeichner.

"This work is life-changing, not just for the kids but for me as well," said Ameen. "I can't imagine not doing it. For me now, theatre has become an avocation and this work is my vocation. From the time I became involved in theatre, I saw it as a way to make

people laugh and cry and think—all those things we think about as theatre professionals—but also as a way to heal, not only myself but others."

According to Zeichner, everyone has a personal reason for getting into volunteer or public service work. In his case, it's his schizophrenic brother for whom he has served as a family liaison for many years. "Shortly after I moved to Los Angeles, I heard about the Imagination Workshop and I thought it would be a way for me to have a real impact in a way I couldn't always have with my brother. After I got involved with the work, I discovered that I was good at it and it was work that really made a difference in people's lives."

Zeichner eventually became the artistic director of Imagination Workshop and continued to work with psychiatric and homeless populations. Things began to change in 1992. The Los Angeles civil unrest that took place as a result of the Rodney King incident prompted a new direction for the program. Up to that point, Imagination Workshop focused on clients of all ages.

"Along with other people, I witnessed all these kids being caught up

in the wave of some quite righteous anger and violence,” said Zeichner. “But the kids really had nothing to do with the conditions that led up to the riots. So along with a few other artists working with Imagination Workshop, I said, ‘Let’s take the work that we’re doing and bring it into the public school system.’”

“We didn’t really know how different working in schools was going to be. I had only been in Los Angeles for a few years and was just starting to learn about what was happening in the LA public school system. It was already in severe decline and the arts were being slashed and burned at that point. So our idea was that the arts could serve not only as an intervention tool, but to fill in an obvious cultural enrichment gap.”

It turned out to be harder than Zeichner and the other artists had anticipated. They started the School Project with around a dozen teaching artists in 1993, taking what Zeichner characterized as an instinctive, spontaneous approach to the situation.

“We didn’t really know exactly what we were getting into,” he said. “The differences between the work we had been doing with mental patients and the homeless and working with at-risk students became apparent very quickly. It became obvious we needed to change the methodology to respond what was really happening in the kids’ lives. We always knew in our work with Imagination Workshop that, with the metaphor of theatre, things were going to come out and needed to be addressed. But we were trained to discourage, even prohibit, reference to real things.”

Zeichner decided that the best way to serve this young population was to allow them to address their needs directly. To that end, Imagination Workshop expanded its philosophical approach and brought in musicians, videographers, painters, and a wide range of performance artists to work with students. The new focus that Zeichner and the other teaching artists were creating would later become Inside Out’s genesis and centerpiece. But the shift in Imagination Work-

shop’s mission eventually led to a schism between the organization and Zeichner.

In 1996, Imagination Workshop decided that working in public schools was no longer the mission of the organization and Zeichner found himself out of a job. As a professional screenwriter and director he had a tough decision to make. He had sold a couple of screenplays and was getting directing work so he figured that it was time to get back to his career and perhaps find other ways to give something back to the community. Zeichner sent a letter to everyone involved in the School Project thanking them for their support and explaining that the program was ending and that he was moving on.

“I started getting calls from artists, funders, schools—even kids—who couldn’t believe that I was leaving and that the program was ending,” Zeichner recalled. “They all said pretty much the same thing—I could not do this. People were determined to not let this program die. I had funders say that they had already put money aside for the program for the next year.”

One of the people who called Zeichner was Camille Ameen. She pleaded for Zeichner to continue the program. And he agreed to start a new nonprofit organization on one condition: that she join him as a partner.

“I was working as an artist at Imagination Workshop and doing theatre and television,” said Ameen. “At that point I wasn’t really interested in becoming an administrator. But when I called him I was adamant that the work that we were doing with young people continue. When he asked me [to become a partner], I asked him ‘How much time do you think this is going to take?’ I still had an acting career. He replied that it would take maybe ten to twelve hours a week.”

Ameen chuckled, recalling that the time demand turned out to be vastly greater. The two of them called all the other artists who had been involved with the Imagination Workshop and explained to them what they were planning to do. They had \$10,000 in grant money and could offer only

small stipends. To their surprise every artist said they wanted to be involved with the new organization.

“We were idealistic but we thought we could make it work,” said Zeichner. “Founding Inside Out really freed Camille and I up to do what we wanted to do—work with kids in a real context and, with theatre as a starting point, begin bringing in a broad range of arts disciplines.”

How it works

While Inside Out continues to evolve with multiple outreach programs, the foundation of the organization is the School Project, the focus of Catterall’s study. Originally the program that originated at the Imagination Workshop consisted of fourteen sessions. Today it’s twenty-three sessions, including a theatre field trip, two Saturday parent-youth workshops, a three-day camping retreat, preview performances, and the culminating performance. Specifically, the program works in the same three middle schools annually—Henry Clay in South Central LA; Florence Nightingale in East LA; and Oliver Wendell Holmes in the Northridge section of the city. Each school has a distinct ethnic population. And therein lies one of the fundamental goals of Inside Out: teaching children how to get along with others who are sometimes very different from themselves.

Here’s how it works: approximately thirty-five students from each of the three schools are enrolled in the program prior to the start of the second semester. The students are divided into three different groups each week and a team of two teaching artists begin working with them after school once a week for two hours. Each school works concurrently, using the same curriculum. In phase one of the project the artists use the fundamentals of theatre—movement, voice, and writing—along with visual arts exercises to help the participants develop new skills.

According to Zeichner and Ameen, just the process of coming together within their own school is the beginning of something entirely new for many of the students. “In a lot of cases, even within their own school, the

kids who end up in the individual groups are not accustomed to interacting with one another,” said Ameen. “That pool in itself can be pretty diverse.”

Da Silva described the process during that period this way: “We spend about seven weeks working in a sort of building block fashion. We start off with improv and work into things like character development, voice, and discussions about other arts—puppetry, dance, singing, and so on. And intertwined in all that are discussions about conflict resolution and how to talk to people and so forth.

“So after seven or eight weeks the students have the basics down and they usually have built up some respect for one another within the groups,” said da Silva. “It’s a big deal for some of them to do that. Even though they’re attending the same school or are in the same class, some of the kids in the groups are mixing with students they generally avoided or have had run-ins with in the past. We try to divide students with that sort of thing in mind, putting them together to force them to deal with each other and build relationships. The idea is to get them ready for playmaking and to understand that they’re going to have to depend on one another to do the creative work.”

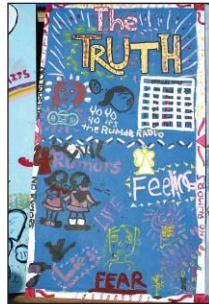
The playmaking process generally starts around the twelfth week of the program. The teaching artists kick it off by holding a “shout-out” with each group, asking students to bring up issues in their lives and community that they’re concerned about. The goal is to settle on one issue that the group will explore and create a short play that will eventually be performed before the other groups, their schools, and their parents.

“It’s a fascinating process,” said Ameen. “We put up this huge piece of butcher paper across the wall and start asking the kids questions. ‘What’s important to you? What do you want to say to your community? What are your hopes? Your dreams? Your fears?’”

“We include everything they suggest,” added Zeichner. “The artists spend about forty-five minutes on this

process, trying to get every possible idea out of everyone. And we don’t censor anything. Then you have all these ideas up on the paper and the kids have to defend their idea. ‘Well what does that mean? What’s the conflict in your story idea?’ What we stress is that we’re creating a narrative story and that any of these ideas has to have an inherent conflict. Otherwise it’s not worth creating a play about.”

Once the discussion has ended, the individual groups vote on which idea to turn into a play. All the groups at



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each school are doing the same process simultaneously, so the teaching artists keep in touch via cell phone to insure that two groups don’t pick the same topic. If one group picks racism, for example, then that theme can’t be chosen by another group.

“The idea is for everyone to do something different so we end up with nine very different plays,” Zeichner explained. Those choices, he said, are often a reflection of the issues that affect participants on a daily basis: gangs, violence, substance abuse, peer pressure, suicide, and teen pregnancy.

Teaching artist Jennifer Seifert explained that, while there are no limits on what they can suggest, if the choices are a little shaky or risqué, the students are reminded that they’re going to be performing the work in front of their parents and families.

“Whatever they choose, we tell them that we’re going to make things bigger, more exaggerated in our play,” said Seifert. “If we’re going to do alcohol, for instance, we’re going to make a beer can the size of trash-can. The idea is to make them understand that if you want to really address an issue, you’re going to have to make it theatrical.”

Seifert said that one constant that always underlies the playmaking work is an effort to put some sort of moral edge to what’s being created.

This past year her group chose to create a play about popularity. It focused on a lonely kid who is invited to join a popular clique of students because he is a good hip-hop dancer. He then appears to be just like them. When they did a run-through of the play, Ameen sent a note suggesting that the moral wasn’t clear.

“I talked to the kids about that and they got it right away,” said Seifert. “They ended up getting into this sort of ‘don’t judge a book by the cover’ thing and the play got much better.”

Seifert and da Silva said that most teaching artists give as much ownership of the playmaking process as possible to the students.

“The whole process can certainly vary a bit, because every artist works a little differently,” explained da Silva.

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“They come up with the ideas and they write it. We use three basic models—a traditional style where they come up with beginnings, middles, and ends, an alternative form that’s more of a performance piece with dancing, singing, or maybe photography. Then we have a third format that uses poetry as a basis for performance.”

After the groups work on their plays for several weeks, they come together in the spring for a three-day camping trip to the Santa Monica Mountains. Other than a brief encounter they have during a field trip to a professional theatre production during the semester, the gathering of the students is a very new experience for most of them. The groups spend the three days refining their plays, creating their sets, and getting to know one another in an environment that is radically different from the urban landscape they’ve grown up in. The concluding event at the campout is a dress rehearsal presentation of the plays for everyone.

“The campout is an amazing event,” said Zeichner. “These kids might as well be from different planets. You have Latino, Asian, white, and African-American kids who have all sorts of pre-conceived notions, myths and fears about one another. And it always just dissolves on that camping trip.

“We don’t actually sit down with the kids and talk with them specifically about these things—that this is about diversity and so on. We never say a word, but by the end of the program and the camping trip they’re saying things like ‘Oh man, I can’t believe I ever thought that these kids were so different from me.’”

“A lot of these kids have never seen the ocean—they don’t know anything but concrete,” said da Silva. “I can’t say exactly how the barriers get broken down, but I just think being in a wilderness area puts them in awe and pulls them together in a fashion. Plus they’re all there for the same reason—they have a play to work on, sets to design, costumes to come up with.”

Getting to the middle

Asked why the School Project works exclusively with middle school students, both Ameen and Zeichner offered emphatic answers.

Zeichner began by noting that around fifty percent of the students enrolled in the LA Unified School District don’t graduate and of those who do finish, only three percent go on to college. “Middle school is where it all goes down,” he said. “Stuff that used to happen in high school is what the middle is about today. You’ve got kids standing at the line, trying to decide who they are and what direction they are going to take. They’re on the cusp of making decisions that are going to impact the rest of their lives, their families, and their communities.

“Many of our students are already involved in gangs, have witnessed shootings and other violence. Their parents aren’t necessarily around, maybe their older brother or sister is in a gang or jail. The idea is to show them that they can do something else—they just don’t know it yet. It’s just that no one has ever told them that and they’ve never had a chance to discover that they were brilliant at something.”

Added Ameen: “Middle school is when risk taking is supposed to happen developmentally. You can either take destructive and self-destructive risks, or creative risks. That’s what makes theatre so interesting for middle school students in the first place. It’s a chance to get up and improvise in front of your peers, and perform in front of an audience. When these kids do their culminating performances at USC, or before a thousand of their peers at their schools, it’s major risk taking. It can get you the same kind of endorphin high you earn from any sort of risk taking, good or bad. The difference is that this is for positive behavior. Theatre gives these kids an opportunity to take those feelings—anger, sadness, embarrassment or whatever else—and find out what they look like in a safe, nurturing environment. Basically, what Inside Out is doing is taking the risk taking that is natural to that age and using it as preventive medicine.”

Because Inside Out targets middle school students, recruiting new participants for the School Project is another challenge. Zeichner said that they try to make sure to get across to students that it’s not a “dorky” program, that it’s actually something the students will *want* to do. They begin recruiting months in advance several different ways: by bringing artists into the school to do advance presentations for individual classes; posting kid-designed posters throughout the schools; word of mouth; through interest generated from the presentation of the plays; and through referrals from counselors, administrators, and teachers who think the program will benefit individual students.

“One of the ways we get kids involved is to tell them that Inside Out will give them a chance to tell stories, without worrying about spelling and grammar,” said Zeichner. “We explain that writing is the work you do in your head. The LA school system is so broken and one of the most profound problems is that it’s graduating students who cannot read. And they often have no motivation to learn—they’re in a dysfunctional school system, there are no books in the house, and the parents don’t read either. Theatre is one way to lead some of these kids to reading.”

Training artists, teaching a curriculum

Two of the cornerstones of Inside Out’s School Project are an annually evolving curriculum and a twenty-session training process.

“At the same time artists are learning our curriculum, they’re bringing their own discipline into the mix,” said Zeichner. “We expect that and encourage it. So what happens is that the artists, along with Camille’s and my guidance, add new exercises every year to the syllabus.”

The two co-directors review all the feedback they’ve received in regard to the prior year’s program before they make any changes in the curriculum. “What we’re essentially trying to do is stuff these kids’ tool bags,” explained Zeichner, “so that by the time they be-

gin working on the play, they have a smattering at least, in some cases more, of exposure to every single arts discipline that's in our repertoire."

And that repertoire is indeed both broad and specific. A reading of *Inside Out's* master curriculum synopsis reveals a variety of exercises, all of which include a listing of the California Visual and Performing Arts content standards for theatre that are covered by the exercise; an explanation of the life skills underlying the exercise; and warm-up, main body, and closure steps. Ameen said that every exercise gets an on-site tryout to measure its effectiveness before it's actually included in the curriculum.

"Training the artist isn't just about them mastering the curriculum," said Ameen. "A lot of it has to do with learning how to work with young people. We have a whole methodology of inclusion. A lot of artists aren't necessarily prepared for this kind of work. It can be very difficult to not lose your temper with these kids sometimes. We've had anger management classes for the artists. A lot of our kids have problems at home and we need to understand as best we can what's behind that when they give a teaching artist a really hard time. So the training of the artists includes learning how to intervene in a way that's not shaming to the kid."

Zeichner echoed Ameen's comments about *Inside Out's* curriculum and training. "It's important to bear in mind that our primary objective is not to turn the kids into artists," he said. "Every exercise is designed to work on some aspect of socialization—things like conflict resolution, diversity, self respect, or community building. What we're trying to do through the arts is to develop new competencies, a social conscience in these children, and a sense of compassion for one another and the rest of world. That sensibility is always a part of our training of artists and what we include in the curriculum."

Both da Silva and Seifert went through the organization's training process. Seifert, who's been with the

program for six years, is a professional actor who works regularly onstage and in film and television.

"You might start out with the exercise called Hitchhiker, Seifert explained. "In this case, you have to adopt the emotion of the person getting into the car and go over the issue of emotional changes. Then we do a reflect-respect performance art piece using interpretive dance, and talk about respect and disrespect and what they mean to each person.

"We'll also do a conflict resolution improv, which is a really important thing for these kids," said Seifert. "So many of them are used to seeing and using violence as a way to solve a problem. We always try and reaffirm peaceful resolution and never violence as a solution."

To illustrate her point, Seifert talked about the group of students she worked with this past year, a class she characterized as the most difficult she had ever worked with.

"One day, the lead actor in our play had a sort of nervous breakdown," said Seifert. "All he would do is cry and kick the lockers. I tried to find out what was going in his life that upset him so much. Basically, while I was still in control as a teacher, I also tried to treat him as an equal in what we were doing, to make him understand that I respected him and would listen to whatever he had to say. I think that once you show a student that you respect him and his talents and that you're listening, he'll start to listen to you.

"I also told him that I wanted to channel what was going on with him into his acting, and that seemed to strike a chord for him and he calmed down. Later, when he was interviewed by a local TV station, he said acting allowed him to vent his anger onstage instead of at people and things in his life. I think that says a lot about how theatre and arts in general can make a real difference."

Da Silva had been a teacher in her native Canada before moving to Los Angeles to advance her performing arts career. She's been with *Inside Out* for nearly ten years.

She talked about the dynamic of team teaching in the School Project. "Every artist brings something different to the process, so you're always paired with someone whose skills are very different than your own," she explained. "For instance, as a former teacher, I'm really good at classroom management. So I might be teamed with an individual who's primarily a working artist without much teaching experience. Honestly, I don't think there's an ideal teacher in this situation except you have to really love kids because middle school students are such a challenge."

While da Silva is paid a stipend like other *Inside Out* teaching artists, she's quick to point out that it's not a way to make a living. She also manages a spa, runs acting workshops, and does a little catering on the side. "For me personally, I'd stay with *Inside Out* without the money. But I'm one of the few. We're all starving artists and need to make a living, even when you love the work. As an immigrant—I just earned citizenship recently—you want to give something back, especially in a place like Los Angeles. This is a place with so much division, stress, turmoil, and racial disharmony. I want to help make it a better place to live. A program like *Inside Out* changes the lives of children who live here. And if you change the lives of people who live here—especially children—you're investing in the future of the city as well."

Da Silva also said that her work with *Inside Out* gives her a sense of family. She ticked off the names of several students she's worked with over the years who are still in touch with her, long after they've gone through the program.

"I know it's empirical data that sells things but all you have to do is watch the kids as I have over the years and see what the arts can do for them," she said. "The self-esteem, the development of empathy and leadership skills, and self-awareness speak for themselves. Does this program have an impact? Yes, absolutely—it's good for kids, neighborhoods, families, and schools. Any community could do the same thing with a couple of good ad-

ministrators, committed teachers, and schools willing to embrace it.”

Mentors and changed lives

Rachael Clarke, Aaron Blaine, and Jonathan Foley are all former Inside Out students. Both Clarke and Blaine also worked in the organization’s growing mentoring program. Foley participated in the School Project in 2005 and intends to apply for a mentoring position this coming year.

The mentoring program came about organically about six years ago, said Zeichner. Former Inside Out middle school participants re-enter the program and work alongside teaching artists, serving as role models for their younger peers. The idea, explained Zeichner, is that these students not only are helping out in the classroom and during events like the campout, but they also get the opportunity to develop their own artistic abilities and learn leadership skills.

Mentors became part of the School Project when several middle school graduates kept asking Zeichner and Ameen to establish some sort of program for high school students. “It sort of floundered at first, because frankly high schoolers are a different animal,” said Zeichner. “We had to figure out what it meant to be a mentor, answer some questions like ‘What kind of training does it take?’ and ‘What can we ask them to do and not do?’

“Now the program has developed to the point that we have a couple of college students who have come back as lead mentors who oversee the high school mentors. And they really do make a difference,” continued Zeichner. “The ratio on our site is one adult to every six students. So when you throw a mentor into the mix, you have more like a one-to-four ratio. They’re also a tremendous help on the campout. A lot of mentors end up working one-on-one with high needs students on that trip, and we’re always getting letters from kids who talk about how much a mentor helped during the campout.”

Clarke and Blaine both remember their Inside Out experience vividly. Clarke, now in her third year at Cali-

fornia State University, Los Angeles, as a dance and communication major, took part in the School Project when she was in the sixth grade.

“My brother, who’s a year older than me, was in the program before me,” she said. “I didn’t really know much about it, except that they went to camp. I thought, ‘Hey, I want to go to camp.’ I used to go every Wednesday. They broke into groups and you didn’t necessarily know everyone, or maybe you were in with someone you didn’t like. I was like everyone else at first. You know, lots of attitude. But you start with the acting exercises and gradually everyone opens up. That’s just the way it works.”

Clarke still laments that she couldn’t repeat the program the next year. Her school got a new principal who decided the school couldn’t accommodate the program and eliminated it. But she got a different kind of opportunity in the eighth grade: Ameen asked her to come back as a mentor on the annual camping trip. Clarke looks back on the experience now with some perspective, but she said at the time it was “weird.” She was younger than most of the other mentors and didn’t feel like she was up to the task.

“They gave us these little whistles to help control the kids, but I kept thinking ‘I’m still in grade school,’” said Clarke. “I felt more like a participant. I think it was Jonathan who asked me why I was just sitting around. He told me I was a mentor and had to act like one. By the end of the weekend, I was giving orders and advice like everyone else.”

Clarke went on to mentor in the program throughout her high school years. “The thing that you learn is that no matter who you are when you arrive at Inside Out, everyone is there for the same reason—to laugh and to make a play. A lot of these kids are used to listening to gunfire in their neighborhoods every night. When you’re working on your play, or doing an improv, or painting a set, you get to put all that stuff aside. When I was a participant, I always knew that no matter what happened that day, at three o’clock, nothing else mattered but what I was doing in that program.”

Clarke is one of those rare Inside Out students who not only learned life skills in the program but is also planning a career in the arts. “I learned a lot about how to handle emotions as an actor, and I also still use that skill in my daily life.”

Clarke apparently learned something more: a few years ago, she and another former student made a short Inside Out video that Zeichner and Ameen show to funders and potential students.

“I don’t know about other arts programs,” said Clarke, “but the reason I think Inside Out works is because everyone is treated the same, no matter what their story is. And besides, for every student who’s had this or that happen to him or her, there’s always an artist or mentor who’s got a pretty similar story. So there’s always someone you can talk to about your problems because they’ve had a similar experience. In the end, we’re not just talking about turning kids around from stuff they’ve picked up on the street. I know kids who might have ended in gangs, on drugs, or even dead if they hadn’t done Inside Out.”

Aaron Blaine’s involvement in Inside Out was briefer than Clarke’s, and it took a while, he said, to figure out what the experience meant to him. Blaine is now in his fourth year at the University of California, Berkeley, majoring in Spanish linguistics, with a minor in education.

He was enrolled in the School Project as a seventh and eighth grader. He signed up initially, he said, because he had a friend in the program. The program took on a different weight in his second year because his mother had passed away. “I really needed some structure and stability in my life and the Inside Out program really gave me that. I was not real sure who I was at that point in my life and it’s where I learned to stand up for myself and say what I thought.

“I’m not an artist, but what you learn from this kind of experience are things you can use for the rest of your life,” said Blaine. “For instance, the acting-based exercise taught me how to think creatively. And as an educa-

tion minor, I've been volunteering in a third-grade classroom that includes a wide range of students with all kinds of issues. It's always hard to figure out which lesson which students will respond to.

"The one thing that they all take part in is the arts lessons, whether it's reading a story and drawing a picture that illustrates the story, or listening to music and dancing," said Blaine. "The kids invariably work together and get along better during arts activities than anything else. My point is, it reminds me of that fundamental Inside Out sensibility—being allowed to express yourself, say what's on your mind the way you want to say it or do it, and the freedom to do it in a safe zone. Feeling safe—I think that's incredibly important for kids who are in danger or afraid far too often."

There's a twist to Blaine's Inside Out involvement; after he spent one year as a mentor, he fell out of touch as he continued on in high school. Then Ameen got a call one day.

"I hadn't heard from Aaron in years when he called me," Ameen recalled. "He was in his senior year and had been awarded a scholarship by the Hispanic Heritage Foundation. As part of that award, he was allowed to give a thousand dollars to any charity he wanted and he chose Inside Out. I was stunned."

Blaine wrote a letter to Ameen, explaining that why he had chosen to give the money to Inside Out—to sponsor a student through the program. She decided he could do something even better: come to the camping retreat and talk to kids about what the program had meant to him. So he flew down during a break from his studies and spent a day and a night at the campout. "When he spoke to the kids you could hear a pin drop," said Ameen.

Blaine said he had just given some thought as to why he had succeeded in high school and realized that giving the charity money to Inside Out was an obvious choice. "It never occurred to me to actually come and talk to the kids, but when Camille

and Jonathan asked, I couldn't say no. All I really said was to get the most of this, because it goes really fast, too fast. They gave me a standing ovation. I just wanted to give something back. I think that's part of Inside Out too—learning to give back to the people and community who gave you something."

Jonathan Foley started his ninth grade year recently. He takes singing lessons and he likes acting. There's one other thing worth knowing about Foley: he has Asperger's Syndrome, a form of autism that affects an individual's ability to deal with a changing environment or social situations. Foley went through the School Project program last year. Inside Out's commitment to the differently abled puts students like Foley on an even playing field with their peers.

Foley said the experience gave him more self-confidence and sparked his new interest in acting. He particularly liked working on the play. "We did a play called *Burning Family Trees*," he said. "It was all about the things that families have to go through sometimes, like divorce, and how that sort of thing affects children."

As far as how he was treated within his group, Foley said simply, "I was just like anyone else, a member of the group. At first I was afraid to tell anyone I was autistic because I thought they would tease me nonstop. And there was a little of that by a few students, but other kids and the teachers stood up for me and it stopped."

Like Blaine and Clarke, Foley learned something about giving back as a result of his experience. "I want to become a mentor because people were so helpful to me. Maybe I can help others in the same way," he said.

Foley added that "anyone can learn some things about themselves if they do this. It's a golden opportunity for any kid who's having trouble expressing himself. For anybody who's having a hard time getting along, making friends, this is it. This is where you can start changing all that."

Studies, funding, and commitment

Ameen and Zeichner have been running Inside Out for ten years. In that time their programs have served nearly three thousand students and premiered more than two hundred plays. And the organization continues to grow and evolve. In 2002, they established a base in Venice in a re-named building, the Venice Center for Peace with Justice and the Arts. Zeichner, who lives nearby, calls the center one of the heartbeats of the community. "Setting down roots was a natural progression," he said. "We wanted to have a home, a place where we didn't have to put up a set and break it down the same night."

But they still encounter skepticism—no matter what studies like Catterall's conclude or how many anecdotes they collect—regarding the power of the arts to make a difference in children's lives.

"It always blows my mind when people don't get it," said Zeichner. "But it happens. For instance, we were at a school for nine years and had the full support of the principal, and then a new principal came in and his pet project was boot camp—a California program that sends kids to a six-week military-type program. And he didn't get what we were doing—he thought it was kind of soft and ineffective—even though he was hearing differently from other school staff. We hung in at the school for two years, but you need the support of the administration to make it work so we moved on to a school where we could have a healthier partnership."

The two do think studies like Catterall's can make a difference, however, because sometimes it's quantifiable data that funders want to see. And without funding, Inside Out would quickly end. "Sometimes studies make a difference and sometimes they don't," said Zeichner. "In the end, honestly there are some people in positions of power and influence who just see the arts as expendable. Our program costs \$1,200 per kid. It costs over \$100,000 annually to incarcerate a juvenile female. But we're also talk-

ing about a legislature that reduced the California Arts Council to a mere ghost of its former self.”

Ameen thinks content standards mandated at the state level are part of the problem. “There was a state study a while back in which principals were asked whether or not they believed in the importance of the arts in the curriculum and apparently they got a 100 percent affirmative response,” she said. “But when it came down to how much money individual schools were dedicating to the arts the answer was zero or very low in many cases. I’m certain that part of the reason is there is so much pressure to meet the content standards. If you don’t, the school loses what little money it is receiving from the state.”

Inside Out began working on gathering statistical data validating the success of their programs a few years ago, said Ameen, after she realized that producing that kind of proof was a growing trend. “We had lots of evidence from students who personally identified Inside Out as a changing point of their lives. I was at a party one day talking to a banker about the program and he said ‘Well, what are the statistics?’ And I said, ‘Well, I have anecdotal evidence’ and he replied, ‘Well, I don’t believe in anecdotal evidence.’”

Zeichner does concede that the program has changed in the ten years since he and Ameen began. And he worries sometimes whether or not it can continue.

“It’s an interesting question,” he said. “When we started, people were surprised to get a paycheck. They did the work because they were drawn to it and cared deeply about what they were doing. But as we have become more perceived as an institution, and as the budget has grown, and we have roots and so on, a different energy has emerged. I’m not going to say it’s better or worse, just different. We don’t have the same level of grassroots roll-up-your-sleeves all the time drive that we used to have. And we really have to think about how to take care of our artists and other staff. Honestly, it’s absolutely absurd to ex-

pect anyone to do what Camille and I do.”

Zeichner knows that Inside Out’s growth is what happens to a lot of nonprofit organizations: they get bigger and tougher to manage and sometimes that spells the end of even very good programs.

“It’s a fascinating issue,” he said. “The question you have to answer in order to survive is ‘Can we professionalize and grow and survive?’ And as the founders of the organization, Camille and I are beginning to think ahead about succession. We don’t want Inside Out to be held back or constricted by our limitations.”

What Ameen and Zeichner are certain of is that Inside Out’s programs are replicable in any community. “There are always lots of people in communities who want to make a difference,” said Ameen. “You just need people who are committed and passionate about the arts and what they can do. What we’re doing could work in any city, large or small.”

Da Silva summed it up with another comment about her “Tom” anecdote in which a mother couldn’t believe someone had something good to say about her child: “That story says it all to me,” she said. “For so many at-risk kids, the only calls that come into the house about them from school are negative. The parents are invariably shocked to hear the good, positive things about their children. Time and again they’ve heard the same thing—the teacher doesn’t like him, he’s always getting into trouble, and so on. It doesn’t have to be that way. We give them an arts experience where they express themselves and someone actually listens to what they have to say. And you just can’t measure how valuable that actually is.”