

Girls from the She Can Create project involved in some (authorised) street art making.



She can do it all – and have fun!

In a bravura display of balancing study and community involvement, a University of Melbourne student-led project wrapped up last month in a beautiful big explosion of colour, creativity and song. By Kate O'Hara.

FEATURE

While one started out in a tucked-away Melbourne studio with 10 eager girls, a graphic designer and Gertie the dog.

Weeks two, three and four went by in a flash of colour with spray cans, DJ decks and a chorus of sewing machines.

Week five was down with hip hop and by week six was all about the animation.

This was 'She Can Create', a student-led program of creative workshops for young, bright and culturally diverse girls from the Flemington housing estate, and it all culminated in November with a final exhibition at the Parkville campus of the University of Melbourne.

The brainchild of student Angela Keating and her project team, and delivered in partnership with Jesuit Social Services (JSS), She Can Create offered up an eight-week program for the group to get creative

and explore identity, opportunity and their futures.

"My friend Kate and I had volunteered with the Flemington estate community's homework club for a few years before we conceived the project," Ms Keating says.

"We felt part of a really friendly, welcoming community straight away. When we met this group of girls they were about 12 years old, just entering high school. By the time they got to age 15 and 16, we could see they were facing an array of challenges and we were keen to put together something specifically for them, outside of the homework club and their everyday life on the estate.

"With support from JSS senior worker Asha Saleh, we applied for a Dreamlarge Student Grant last year and got She Can Create underway."

While the project was designed to break across the cultural, social and economic barriers faced by recently arrived residents, it was fundamentally about supporting participants to celebrate and embrace being a young teenage girl in Australia.

Having worked on JSS's Youth Settlement Support Program for the past four years, Ms Saleh instantly saw the value in the project. She Can Create supports the organisation's broader program by opening up opportunities to enter Australian society through activities that are more mainstream.

"It also supports our work by providing more opportunities for girls to be involved in such programs," Ms Saleh says.

"She Can Create is unique – no other provider is offering this sort of program

with an arts focus.

"Many of the other programs are either maths- or science-focused, which really reflects the aspirations of many families in the area. I've found that parents are eager for their children to be doctors, or lawyers, and don't consider a career in the arts, so their children don't consider it either. This was about opening their eyes to what's possible out there."

The girls and project leaders met every Saturday, catching public transport to visit the studios of artists and performers across Melbourne. Each workshop was a lively, colourful mess of creating, chatting and laughing with the facilitators.

Along with writing a song and creating some street artwork, the group produced an animation, which 14-year-old Najat Mussa says was a lot of fun.

"The theme of our story was outer space and all the crazy things that could be in space. It was really cool to see how animation worked and in the end we had our very own animation video."

As with any community engagement project, Angela puts the program's success down to the existing and developing relationships between project leaders, the girls, their parents and local community organisations.

"What I think worked was that we were already connected to the community, we'd gained some trust through previous volunteering," she says.

"More than money, more than anything else, that relationship was easily the most valuable thing. You can't just turn up to a community group with funding and

run a successful program.

"We also had to carefully manage our budget. At first, we didn't offer the workshop facilitators any fee – we were naïve and thought to ourselves 'of course they'll say yes!'"

"The reality of course was that all the artists are community-minded themselves, doing what they can with their own small grants and resources. In the end, offering a small fee was the least we could do for the commitment they gave to our project and as a boost for their own worthy work."

Even with stretched budgets and time-poor diaries, She Can Create very quickly gathered support from a range of organisations including Ladyfingers DJ Co-operative, Crooked Rib Art Collective and the MASSIVE Hip Hop Choir.

As the project wrapped up in November, Ms Keating sat with the girls and encouraged them to write down some thoughts about the program.

"As they started discussing what to write I heard them tell each other that it had to be 'deep and meaningful', not just what we did and whether they liked it – so I think they kind of get the significance of it all!" she says.

"We hope they have gained some confidence in trying new things, meeting new people and getting out and about. In the meantime, we've also had a lot of fun."

The She Can Create project team and JSS will be exploring funding opportunities to run the program again in 2013.

www.facebook.com/shecancreate
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