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TIMES HOLIDAY CAMPAIGN

In Venice, a full palette of artistic options for youths

By JEAN MERL
Times Staff Writer

Portrait photographer Russell Baer certainly wasn't looking for ways to fill time — his schedule was bursting with magazine work and celebrity clients. But, despite his success, he had felt something was missing on the day he first contacted a small nonprofit arts organization in Venice.

"I had been wanting to do some volunteer work, but I had no idea what," Baer said. A friend suggested Venice Arts, and he soon found himself in the organization's storefront gallery and administrative offices on Lincoln Boulevard, being interviewed by one of the group's co-founders.

In the 5½ years since, Baer has been leading workshops and guiding budding photographers as part of the organization's art mentoring program. About 40 artists volunteer to teach classes to youngsters ages 6 to 18.

Younger students explore their creativity along a wide spectrum of media in art discovery classes at the Vera Davis Center, housed in a former public library building.

Older, more advanced students work in photography, digital arts and media arts at the organization's gallery.

Classes are held after school, on Saturdays and during the summer. Up to 400 youngsters participate each year, roughly 140 in each of three cycles throughout the year.

The program is open to all Venice residents and to low-income students from an expanded area. There is little or no charge for instruction or materials; the organization relies on private donations and government grants to keep its doors open. Venice Arts received a \$25,000 grant from the Times Holiday Campaign, based on donations from readers.

"We were interested in finding a way to link what was then a very creative community with [Venice's] large population of families living in poverty," said Executive Director Lynn Warshafsky. She co-founded Venice Arts (www.venice-arts.org) 13 years ago with fellow photographer Jim Hubbard, now the organization's creative director.

Key to the program's success, Warshafsky said, is the close attention artist-mentors lavish on the youths, starting in workshops with no more than three students.

"You never know when a child is going to have an experience that will be life-changing," she said.

Pablo Toledo, lead digital media artist on the organization's small staff, said the students "are really hungry to learn." What's most rewarding, he said, is to see newly confident students using their new skills to help others in the program.

Among the many workshops are beginning digital animation, advanced film, comic book design and do-it-yourself design.

Mara Schoner said the art mentoring workshops have been a big hit with her children. Dante

storytelling classes also have helped Dante with some developmental challenges.

"These classes also have been good academically because they really emphasize the structure. You have to think things through in a logical way so you communicate your ideas to others," Schoner said. "The mentors have been really supportive and yet very strict in terms of having the kids do things in the ways they need to be done."

Francesca Thomas, who just turned 16, started taking classes at Venice Arts two years ago, drawn by a flyer in her Venice neighborhood.

Now she spends most weekdays after school and Saturdays at the gallery, taking classes and working in the darkroom as one of the organization's three youth art mentors.

"The mentors really help you out when you need it," said Francesca, who discovered she has a talent for photography and enjoys every aspect, right down to darkroom printing.

She also likes being a mentor herself.

"I love it, because you get to give back to other kids," Francesca said. "These mentors come in and teach you, and you get to share what you learned with other kids."

The annual fundraising campaign is part of the Los Angeles Times Family Fund of the McCormick Tribune Foundation, which will match the first \$500,000 raised at 50 cents on the dollar.

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