

ARTS

A REASON TO SURVIVE

This non-profit organization helps kids deal with adversity through the arts.



In 1992, Matt D'Arrigo's mother and sister were diagnosed with cancer within months of each other. He was a 19-year-old art student in college and took time away from school to be with them. As he watched the people he loved suffer through chemotherapy, D'Arrigo felt their pain. It was the most difficult period of his life.

The one thing that helped him during this time was art. He had an easel in his room, so he would go and close his door, put on some music and paint. This provided a creative outlet for him. D'Arrigo says, "It was a great escape for me. There was a transforma-

tion that would take place. It was incredible. I would feel down and depressed, so I would go up and paint and feel wonderful afterward. I thought wouldn't it be great to create an organization that could provide this same opportunity to others - especially kids - who were facing struggles and challenges, to help them forget what they're going through, to help them express themselves so they could experience what I felt."

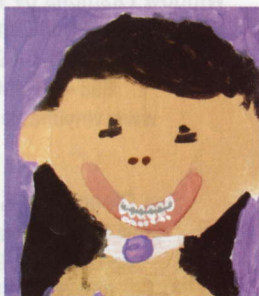
That's when D'Arrigo, founder and executive director of "ARTS - A Reason To Survive" came up with the idea to form a non-profit to help kids facing hardships such as a death in the family, divorce, domestic violence and homelessness. Established in 2001, ARTS has been helping children deal with these kinds of issues through the practice of visual, performance and literary arts. The services, which include art classes, a studio gallery to showcase and sell the children's art, internship and arts-related jobs for teens and community art projects, are free to kids and their families.

D'Arrigo originally partnered with the Ronald McDonald House Charities in 2001 to bring art to special-needs children. On weekends, he and volunteers took art supplies to the Ronald McDonald House, Children's Hospital,

The San Diego Center For Children and other youth-serving facilities so kids could paint, do ceramics, watercolors, collages, murals, journaling, music and other art forms. It wasn't therapy to draw out deep-rooted feelings. He wanted kids to get away from their problems for a while. "That's the beauty of it," D'Arrigo conveys. "It's the process over the product. Taking their minds off the needles or the chemotherapy or the medication. We're just doing art with the kids."

Two months after D'Arrigo started ARTS, the terrorist attack took place on 9/11 in New York. D'Arrigo initiated a community project called "The Children's Quilt" to allow kids to express their feelings about the tragedy. At the Ronald McDonald House, children drew, painted and wrote poems and messages about peace, love and hope on one-square-foot pieces of fabric with the intent to put them together in a quilt and bring it to New York City. Word spread and soon there were people throughout San Diego County and even from other states who wanted to take part. After many months, 5,000 children and volunteers had sewn 50 quilts with 100 squares of individually created fabric art on each.

They partnered with an organization in New York and brought the quilts to an abandoned firehouse near Ground Zero, where



BY RAY WONG
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A REASON TO SURVIVE.

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they hung and displayed the quilts on the walls for people to view and discuss on the one-year anniversary of 9/11. "The kids loved it because they were contributing and making the people of New York feel better," D'Arrigo says. "The response from the families in New York - to see these images created by kids in San Diego 3000 miles away - it was very powerful."

Despite the success of this community project, ARTS faced a bumpy road in its first years. It was difficult for D'Arrigo to raise money for the nonprofit. Prospective donors wanted to see a track record. D'Arrigo had quit his job to devote his energy to ARTS, and at times, he was literally looking for change to buy his next meal. His focus and sacrifice eventually paid off. The first year, ARTS raised \$40,000. In year two, that went up to \$68,000. By the end of their third year, that amount had grown to \$163,000. In year four, the nonprofit took in \$350,000. And in year five - \$450,000. Now in their seventh year, they have a million-dollar budget.

They had developed a volunteer training and were going into hospitals, group homes and shelters to conduct expression workshops in writing and visual arts with structured, themed activities. They also took "art carts" filled with various art supplies to these facilities so kids could choose the type of art they wanted to do. According to D'Arrigo, the act of giving the children choices when they didn't have that kind of freedom in other areas of their lives was empowering in itself.

In 2006, D'Arrigo was granted the opportunity to realize his vision of an art center for children. The old Naval Training Center in Point Loma had closed in 1997. The City of San Diego wanted to develop the area into a community of non-profits and businesses together called Liberty Station. The Naval Training Center (NTC) Foundation oversaw the construction of 26 buildings in the development for non-profits focused on arts, culture, science and technology.

ARTS became the first nonprofit to sign a lease in the new development and opened in February 2007 with a 7,000 square-foot facility dedicated to the arts for children. It was a dream come true for D'Arrigo, who always wanted to be able to bring kids to an art center to nurture their creativity.

The ARTS facility houses a music room, media arts lab, performing space, painting



ABOVE: Hope, from Monarch School, is proud of her self-portrait.

studio, mixed media studio, ceramic studio, administrative offices and the ARTS Gallery, where youths can showcase their art and sell their work. They hold artists' receptions, and kids earn a percentage of the proceeds from their artwork.

In doing so, children learn practical skills in marketing and sales. ARTS incorporates a framing business to help teens develop hands-on job skills. They hire low income and homeless youths to work in the center. The nonprofit is also developing scholarships to benefit kids who want to pursue an arts education in public and private colleges.

Inocente Izucar is a 14-year-old girl who works part-time at ARTS. She has been homeless for seven years of her life because her dad beat her mom, and they left him when Izucar was seven. She is now living in a domestic violence shelter with her mother.

Izucar has been involved in ARTS for a year and a half after being referred there from an after-school program. She does painting, photography and helps with classes and the gallery at ARTS.

"ARTS has helped me by getting me away from the house [shelter]. It keeps me from doing bad stuff, stuff that gets me in trouble," she says. "It's knowing that you're helping someone else. I help the little ones. I help them forget their problems."

Adriana Escobar has been the program coordinator at ARTS for six months. She graduated from the University of San Diego with a degree in communication studies and a minor in art. Escobar wanted to work in a nonprofit, and ARTS is a perfect fit. She is responsible for the assessment and enrollment of students at ARTS. In addition, she teaches art classes, supervises youth workers and is in charge of

the organization and upkeep of the art rooms.

Escobar is ecstatic about her role. "It combines my biggest loves. Art has always been one of my favorite hobbies, and I love children and education. I've seen it [ARTS] make a difference in kids. The energy here is really uplifting and empowering."

Yanina Cambareri has been volunteering with ARTS for seven years. She originally studied software engineering with an art minor. She was fortunate enough to hear about ARTS from a volunteer while waiting in line to purchase canvases at an art supply store. Cambareri wanted to contribute and has been part of ARTS ever since. "I feel so strongly about his [D'Arrigo's] vision and what we do. I see a positive change in these children every time I go," she says. "There's a smile or something they say that lets us know we've made a difference."

ARTS has also had a tremendous impact on her. "It's life changing. I'm supposed to be helping these kids, but they're helping me by enlightening my life. The more you give, the more you receive."

In the future, Matt D'Arrigo wants to build his infrastructure and then expand. He would like to develop art centers in other cities. D'Arrigo is fulfilling his mission in life. "I feel this is my purpose. I'm supposed to bring the arts to kids. It [experiencing the cancer of his mother and sister] was the worst time of my life. The beacon of light was going into my room and painting. If this organization can be that beacon for others, we will have been successful."

For more information on ARTS - A Reason To Survive, please call (619) 297-2787 or visit www.AReasonToSurvive.org.