News
Arts and Media



Daughters of Charity Sr. Brenda Fritz, right, consults with painting student Zack Davisson at Presentation Arts Center in St. Louis March 11. Fritz is the center's director and a piano teacher there. (GSR photo/Dan Stockman)



by Dan Stockman

View Author Profile
dstockman@ncronline.org

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It's Tuesday morning, and that means Open Studio at the Presentation Arts Center, when the older adult students can bring projects they're working on and get help or advice, find fresh ideas, or just work with other people.

Today three or four people work on projects in the paint studio. None are likely to be mistaken for the next Picasso or Rembrandt, but it's also not about that: It's about community, it's about learning a new hobby, it's about making hours that might be idle into productive ones. And, of course, it's about art.

The center offers art classes for adults, including drawing, acrylics, watercolor, mixed media, pottery and crafts, including quilting. For children there are after-school classes, and summer and spring break camps. For both children and adults there are guitar and piano lessons, and for children there are weeklong summer camps for theater, dance, improv and comedy. Programs for children are free, while those for adults have small fees to cover the cost of supplies.



The outside of the Presentation Arts Center in St. Louis is covered in art, including a large mural made of plastic bottle caps. (GSR photo/Dan Stockman)

"Art is the expression of the soul," said Daughters of Charity Sr. Brenda Fritz, the center's director. "It speaks to the heart more deeply than almost anything else."

That is true regardless of skill level, she said: Humans need to express themselves, and creating art — whether it's a painting or playing a song or any other form — lets us do that in ways unlike any other. That's true for everyone, but especially for children in poverty or older adults who may not have any other outlet, Fritz said.

"I really believe that what we do narrows the gap between children in poverty" and those with advantages, Fritz said. "This is a very changing neighborhood, and I think we're right where we need to be."

Fritz is also right where she needs to be.

"I was born with music in my DNA," she told Global Sisters Report, noting she was born in Nova Scotia to a family whose love of music goes all the way back to before they immigrated from Scotland. "This is my dream ministry."

Fritz said she knows how the arts can change lives.

"Music was the thing that really was my anchor, in addition to family and school," she said. It was impactful in my life to the point where I really want children in poverty and older adults to experience it."



Art decorates the Presentation Arts Center in St. Louis. The center is housed in the former Our Lady of the Presentation convent and school, and began as a ministry of Presentation parish in 2016. (GSR photo/Dan Stockman)

The center is housed in the former Our Lady of the Presentation convent and school, and began as a ministry of Presentation parish in 2016. That parish has since merged into another nearby, but the Presentation Arts Center remains a beacon in the neighborhood.

"Not only are we the Catholic presence in a neighborhood that has lost a large Catholic parish, but we evangelize through community, beauty and the arts," Fritz said.

In addition to providing music lessons, the center has an instrument loan program, including full-size keyboards for people taking piano lessons.

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And though it is unlikely that the next Mozart is among the piano students, Fritz said some music students have become skilled enough to be paid for playing.

"It also gives them life skills they need — grit, self-confidence and self-discipline," she said. And for older adults, the arts increase civic engagement and self-satisfaction, and learning new skills keeps brains healthy and deters depression, she said.

There are other factors, even beyond art, Fritz said. When children come to the center, they get one-on-one attention they may not otherwise receive. It's a place where there are no judgements.

"It's a safe place to be, where you are valued for who you are, no matter how you play the piano, how you quilt, or how you draw," she said. "That's important in a world where there's so much fear and indifference and lack of human dignity."