

Artist leads troubled teens to self-expression

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Shirley Julien drives every weekday from Coral Gables to Cutler Ridge to teach dance at South Ridge Junior High School. On Saturdays, she takes graduate courses at Nova Southeastern University. On Sundays, there is church. On Mondays, she volunteers at a Miami-Dade prison.

And still, with a week that demands so much, Julien devotes time to troubled girls, devotes time to healing.

"I am trying to reach and help these teenagers before something happens, like them turning to violence, getting on drugs, going to prison, or worse," she says.

Julien is youth director of Breaking Free, a 12-week workshop teaching creative movement and self-expression through the arts for at-risk teenage girls. Each session, Julien teaches a dozen or so girls — ages 14 to 19 — at W.I.N.G.S., (Women In Need of Greater Strength) for Life South Florida, a juvenile residential center in South Dade.

The workshop is held for two hours each Thursday. At the end of the session, the girls make a presentation of their work.

"We use the arts to show the girls how to express who they are," Julien says.

The class is divided into concepts: self, self as relates to others, and future self. The idea is to explore and interpret those concepts in a meaningful, artsy way.

"That may mean creating a dance that expresses who they are or their family situation; it could mean making a drawing that shows what they want their future to be," says Julien. "Basically the art is used to deal with the issues in their life. But we don't go in therapeutically with the goal of fixing them, rather to provide them a space for them to express themselves without judgment. I believe this gives them the opportunity to heal."

This summer, Julien worked with a group of about 10 girls.

AT A GLANCE

Name: Shirley Julien.
Title: Youth director.
Agency: Breaking Free, a part of ArtSpring Inc.
Mission: To teach at-risk teenage girls to express themselves through art.
Quote: "I just feel like it's my duty or pleasure to use my talent to help people by using art for healing."

Soon, that number dropped to seven.

"It was pretty rough. We would start with silent meditation and the girls were so fidgety. They wouldn't sit still. They said mean things to each other and it was just a really negative environment," she says, her voice growing above a whisper.

"But by the end of the program, they had learned some self-respect and a feeling of accomplishment. They had started praising each other, behaving better. Some of the girls were even getting awards for having good grades or being the most improved," she says adding that those accomplishments are the fruit of a partnership with W.I.N.G.S. "And two of those girls are even getting to go home."

In some ways, Julien offers the anecdotes to explain why she is so devoted to troubled teens. It would be so much easier, physically and emotionally, for her to volunteer elsewhere. To make a donation at the door. Or put a check in the mail. Instead, she gives time and talent, a huge slice of herself. But this is her choice.

Nearly a decade ago, when Julien was a student at FIU, she joined the Leslie Neal Dance Company. In 1994, Neal implemented an arts program at a Broward Correctional Facility; Julien helped out. It was called Inside Out.

Neal's dance company, now known as ArtSpring Inc., launched Breaking Free about



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MAKING A DIFFERENCE: Shirley Julien with artwork created by the at-risk teenage girls she works with at Wings.

four years ago. When it started, Julien assisted Neal.

"She was really great at working with the girls, wonderful. As the company began to spread, she took over our youth program," says Neal. "Shirley has a natural desire to work with people and an interest in social issues."

Julien puts it this way: "I really can't explain why I do this. It's very personal for me. It can be difficult because they don't always want to deal with the issues, but I just feel like it's my duty or pleasure to use my talent to help people by using art for healing," she says. "I just feel like if I can get to

them when they are younger, I can make a difference."

She grows quiet, then offers this:

"On the day of the presentation, when I see them performing proudly, it just fills me up. I feel complete at that moment and I know exactly why I am doing this."