

The RAISE Program

Supported in part by the French Regional & American Museum Exchange (FRAME).

The Responding to Art Involves Self Expression (RAISE) program began as a collaboration between the Berkshire County Juvenile Court (BCJC) and the Clark. The court is a leader in developing alternative sentencing for youth and is unique in reaching out to cultural organizations to develop programs. The alternative sentencing model shifts the sentencing paradigm from punishment to education or enhancement. The RAISE program offers participants a new way to think about their lives and their potential. Although the program was developed as an alternative sentence for juvenile offenders, it is a solid program that can be used with any group of young people. While the RAISE program is the only one of its kind in an art museum, it is easily transferrable to other, similar institutions.

Since its inception in 2006, RAISE has served more than 75 boys and girls ages 12 to 17 from Berkshire County. The majority of participants are from households at poverty-threshold incomes and have Department of Children and Families involvement due to abuse and neglect. Most participants are failing in school and are in alternate school settings, and are not involved in structured activities such as sports and clubs. Many participants are in homes with substance abusing parents, or are abusing substances themselves.

RAISE participants generally have no exposure to the arts and culture. They have not seen a play, heard an orchestra, or been to an art museum. They have extremely limited knowledge of art or artists—Remington might only be thought of as a type of gun. These students would never consider walking into a museum; both because they are intimidated by the experience and because a museum has no meaning in their world.

RAISE participants meet for two hours, once a week for five weeks. During this time they participate in a combination of group meetings, writing and self awareness exercises, and gallery talks. At the conclusion of the program each participant gives a half-hour gallery talk for his/her custodial adult(s) and court officials. During this relatively short time period, the program helps the participants to:

- expand their sense of human experience and possibility, including a more constructive sense of how they fit into the larger world.
- learn to look at, think about, and talk about art in a meaningful way.
- realize that their view matters.
- consider an art museum as a place where they belong.
- become more aware of their competencies, including their ability to lead a small group of adults through the museum talking about favorite works of art and answering questions.

The RAISE program has been tremendously successful on many levels. Berkshire County Juvenile Court personnel have lauded the program as "...one of the most effective and uplifting programs offered through the Berkshire County Juvenile Probation Department" and "a revelation of emotion." In the fall of 2009, First Justice Daniel J. Swords visited the program and was so impressed that he has requested that BCJC and Clark staff present the program to other municipalities in the Commonwealth with fine art museums.

Court personnel discuss the RAISE program with the participants and report that it is described as an everlasting experience. While each graduate has a very personal experience from which they draw meaning, the participants all comment that they were affected by viewing works of art and how this experience gave inner meaning to their personal struggles. Prior to the RAISE program, the participants would likely never have gone to the Clark on their own, but following their RAISE program experience they find the museum a peaceful and comforting venue, and want to go back because they felt a sense of personal ownership. The participants felt accepted and cared about without being judged, and their experience is as priceless as the works in the Clark's collection.

RAISE has been recognized for excellence by the International Council of Museums and the French American Museum Exchange. The program has garnered support from the Annenberg Foundation and the United States Department of State. Through the French Regional and American Museum Exchange (FRAME) the program is being replicated at other museums in America, as well as in France. To facilitate replication, Ronna has developed a curriculum guide (available in French and English) that outlines each session, its goals, objectives, and rationales. This spring, RAISE received the AAM EdCom's 2010 Excellence in Programming national award.

The program has had a positive impact on the Berkshire community and has strengthened the Clark's profile. With programs like RAISE, the Clark has reinforced its position that museums are no longer places solely for elite audiences and it has provided an opportunity to serve existing and new audiences in ways that have never before been imagined. RAISE provides alternatives for juvenile offenders in the Berkshire community and is a first step in raising their self esteem and functionality in mainstream society.

But of course, the most important and significant outcomes have been with the participants. There are many stories, but perhaps the most dramatic is that of a participant who is now enrolled in Berkshire Community College studying to be a parole officer. She reported to her probation officer that the RAISE program gave her confidence and taught her that there are options in life. She believes that early intervention with troubled teens can and does make a difference, and she wants to share her transformation with other teens through the court system.

The parents and participants in the program can perhaps best state the outcomes of the program:

“...he has put a lot of effort and thought at the Clark and has changed his outlook on things and is doing a lot of positive thinking.”

“Education versus isolation, learning respect, appreciation for art and culture can only enhance a child’s progress in getting along with others in a positive atmosphere.”

“I believe it is a great alternative sentencing for juveniles of the court. They need as much positive reinforcement as they can get, and new doors to open at every opportunity.”

From participants, when asked what they got out of the program:

“That everyone can do something as long as they put their mind to it.”

“That if I try I can do anything I put my heart into.”

“...knowledge, respect, strength, and a new personality to see the next time I look in the mirror.”

“Apparently I’m smart.”