

Empowering urban youth through dance, theater and community

Special to the Co-op Reporter

By Sarah Crowell

The Bioneers seek to unite nature, culture and spirit in an Earth-honoring vision, and create economic models founded in social justice. An annual Bioneers conference is held each October in Marin County. The following article is transcribed from one of the presentations from the 2006 conference.

“I want to invite you to leap with me into a celebration of art’s capacity to transform culture and restore young people’s vision, expression and self-image. I think it’s an amazing thing that we land here in this room together once a year, and that we celebrate each other. We celebrate our work. We challenge each other. We pull each other up. And at Destiny we do that every day.

We’re a small arts center in a neighborhood that serves only 150 kids at the site. We decided that as an organization so that we could keep it small, so that we could really reach these young people in depth. That’s what it takes. We believe it takes time to get to people. It takes time to give them the sense of their own power and their own truth. So we serve that small number, and the funders are always urging me to serve more kids. So we’re out in 15 schools this year. By next year we’ll be in 25 schools, but we have the same flavor—the same flavor of community that we bring. That kind of spirit is in every single school.

It’s amazing, and it takes time. I say that Destiny Arts Center is like a slow stir. We’re not like a stir-fry, we’re like a stew. We spend time. The organization has been around for 18 years. I’ve been there for 16. Many of the instructors have been there for many, many years. That’s what it takes for young people to trust us enough to give themselves to us, because we’re responsible for them and thus they’re responsible for us.

If you know Destiny, you know that we’re about movement, so we’re moving inside the movement. So can I get everybody to stand up? Can I just have you take your arms straight up? Both hands straight up, and just wiggle your fingers a little bit. See that impact? It looks like a wave, y’all. This is tight. Okay, now wave it side to side, like this. Hey! No kum ba yah, I promise, no kum ba yah. And now take the arms down. It’s beautiful. Looks like a sea of power. Take a breath, and let it out, like an ocean of you. Now, just stand. Stand in your power, grounded in the earth and recognize the work that you’re doing. I want you to recognize that. I want you to see that the work you’re doing is crucial and important to this planet—and own it. Own what you’re doing!

Now I want you to—with that owning of who you are to this planet, to the very survival of this planet—I want you to turn to someone and say thank you. Thank you for doing the work that you’re doing... Okay, now you can stop. There’s a lot of gratitude in the room!

Now, I want you to turn to that same person again, or maybe somebody different, and I want you to look at them and tell them that they are beautiful. Do that... Okay, you can stop now and sit down.

I just created a space for you to see your power in the world, for you to see your beauty in yourself and thus, in somebody else right across from you. I created a community right here in this room, so fast, so easy. And then over time, if that continues, then that community gets deeper and we struggle together, and we tear up together, and we find joy together. We do all of those things. And that’s what we do at Destiny.

I have to tell you a story. I did a theater exercise where I asked a group of young people to get into a circle. It’s called the emotion game. From one to 10; 10 is huge. So I said fear—something that makes you really afraid is in the center of that circle. One, two, three... I went all the way to 10 and [they contorted themselves into positions showing fear]. They worked the fear, y’all.

I said, okay, now we're bliss. Do you understand what bliss is? They answered, extreme happiness. I said, good—that's good enough; we're going to work with that. Okay, we're going to go for extreme happiness. There's something in the center of the circle, and the energy is big, and we're gonna go big for this bliss thing. They were like—one, two, three—and I was like, wait now, you can go for fear, but you can't go for the bliss? This is where the courage comes in, courage and walking in beauty, right?

I prayed, I centered myself and I said, let us be willing to be in the bliss, because if we can't do that, what are we creating? What are we dreaming up for the next thing? What are we dreaming up? So they held hands and they got it! It doesn't happen every time, but this time they got it. I asked, can we make that commitment? Can we make that commitment to be in the bliss? Can we do that? Together they said yes, they nodded their heads, and so I said, one, two, three—I went up all the way up to 10 and by the time 10 hit, there was not a dry eye in that circle. Every single child was weeping, looking at somebody across the circle from them, or looking at somebody's arm or feeling their own bliss. Weeping because they saw each other's beauty and they owned their own. What happens when we create a space for young people? What happens when we give them that opportunity?

I know that the look I give or the touch on the shoulder matters. It matters. It lights up their hidden spaces and lets them make big bold strokes on life paper. Big brush strokes with 'I know what I want and I deserve to get it' in them; big breaths with sighs after them; big wild arms with shakes after them. Big wide strides with 'I know that I belong here,' in them. 'And if I know that I belong here, then I can care about the air, and the earth, and the water; about the person next to me suffering, the person across the street suffering, the person across the ocean suffering. I can care if the globe is warming up, and killing us, killing us and everything wild and green at a speed that defies imagination.'

How will the children know that the earth is theirs to care about? We gotta know first, and then live in that knowing next to this generation that looks to so many of us like they don't care. But we're selling them doses of self-hatred wrapped in fancy TV-Wal-Mart-Gap-gotta-have-it-flashy-stuff. Get good grades. Get a good man. Make the right decisions. Go to college-stuff. E-mail and cell phone, don't talk to each other face-to-face fear stuff. Ignore the racism, sexism, consumerism, homophobia that keeps running us stuff. Then we turn around and tell them they need to care because the world is falling apart and they are the leaders of tomorrow. We say, get it together y'all. You're the ones who will make the difference.

But you know, it takes time. It takes a whole lot of time, a whole lot of love, a whole lot of spirit and patience for them to recognize that they have the power to make change. And then they can choose.

Oh, let us be a generation not afraid to look into each other's eyes and proclaim that we see something beautiful there. Because if we don't the globe is going heat up and the water is going to rise up and we won't even notice. "Without community, we're as good as dead," the young poet said, and I believe her. So let's get up, let's stand up. Let's walk the talk together. Let's touch each other. Let's be afraid and then dare to love each other anyway. Together. Won't you join me?"

To learn more about the Destiny Arts Center, visit www.destinyarts.org.

Sarah Crowell is the executive director of the renowned Destiny Arts Center in Oakland, California, and has been empowering youth through dance, theater, violence-prevention and leadership classes since 1990, encouraging youths to find their voices through the arts.

Special note: Tune in to KVMR 89.5 on the second and fourth Tuesday of each month from 1-2 p.m. for "Voices of the Bioneers," a program underwritten by Sacramento Natural Foods Co-op.