

## **DREAMS Center for Arts Education**

Wilmington, North Carolina

[www.dreamswilmington.org](http://www.dreamswilmington.org)

**Category: After School; At-Risk Youth**

“I believe if you present people with life-giving alternatives, they’ll take them,” says Tracy Wilkes, founder of the DREAMS Center for Arts Education in Wilmington, an afterschool arts program for at-risk kids.

I believe it’s criminal for kids not to have the chance to explore and nurture their creative abilities. Art saves lives.”” Given that choice, Tracy decided to create an arts program that would help kids become whole, creative people.

Students at DREAMS get a choice of participating in visual art, music, dance, drama and creative writing. Before they even begin, Tracy and her staff learn a fair amount about each kid, from their previous experience with the arts to why they want to participate in DREAMS. Each student makes a serious commitment, in writing, to participate. Though students concentrate on the disciplines they’ve chosen in their classes, Tracy encourages teachers to take an interdisciplinary approach, with drama and dance teachers working with creative writing teachers to create a dramatic production including sets and costumes created by visual art students.

“We look at ourselves as bridge-builders between different communities. That’s very important to me, because that’s what the arts do: they connect different cultures,” Tracy says. Twice a year, DREAMS students share what they’ve learned with their families and community in a culminating performance/exhibit. A regularly scheduled eight-page newsletter shares student work and keeps parents informed on what their kids are accomplishing.

Accomplishment is key, according to Tracy. “The major way self-esteem comes to a person is through accomplishment.” These kids definitely need an avenue to self-esteem. 30-40% of DREAMS kids get connected to the program through referrals from the Department of Social Services, and have family histories of abuse and neglect. A significant number of them are also referred by the Southeastern Mental Health Center. Tracy believes that kids need to create products to have opportunities to feel great about themselves, but also need the ongoing support of the process of learning about the arts and about themselves.

All of the DREAMS artists are professionals, very high caliber. “The artists who get involved really have a mission and a need to give back to the community,” Tracy observes.

DREAMS, like the [urban smARTS](#) program in San Antonio, Texas, has a strong focus on healing the child and the family. Social workers are actively involved in working with the children. Both believe a truly effective program has a variety of elements, not just classes but performances, parent involvement and field trips.

Though Tracy, with her passion and seemingly boundless energy, has been central to the program since it began, she has been careful to share responsibility and kudos with a variety of others, from a strong and committed executive board to her fellow administrative staffers to the teachers, and finally the Parent Advisory Committee, made up of parents who are passionate about DREAMS. These are working parents who juggle jobs, child-raising and their own lives. Parents of DREAMers are required to attend at least three Parent Advisory Board meetings each semester. They believe that DREAMS matters, so they find time to help keep it going through discussion of issues, fund-raising, organizing family events and “supporting the artistic lives of our children.” DREAMS has also brought in an outside evaluator, who evaluated the program and came up with written, objective results on the DREAMS’ success. “The organization is never one person,” says Tracy, who has made a point from the initial stages of

surrounding herself with smart, good people. “I believe in co-creation,” she adds. “I’m a consensus builder.”

Tracy has built a program the way Habitat for Humanity builds houses, involving the community and the people who will live there in the building process. Her work ensures that everyone involved has a personal investment in the success of the program, and a sense of pride in what they have accomplished. Two DREAMers have graduated from the program, and one is starting her first year at Peace College in Raleigh. Everyone involved now understands what Tracy means when she says, “Art, to me, is the language of the human spirit. Particularly with kids who have suffered. They have to find a way to express that spirit.” And they do express that spirit. Every day. “We see it all the time, these little miracles.”