



GIVING VOICE

By Stephanie Lager

Instrumentals, melody, and movement are all components of the personal voice we share with the world. When we can't express ourselves, we stifle that voice, suffocating the very parts that are starving for expression. But thanks to Vista's flourishing and growing Arts Enrichment Program, more and more students are learning how to find, nourish, and share their own distinct voice with the world.

In 2005, Vista received a generous grant that allowed them to establish their first Arts Enrichment Program, and they knew just the woman they wanted to lead it. Felecia Scott was—and still is today—an energetic, benevolent teacher running a successful program called All About Kids LA, where she works with children who are victims of trauma. Vista brought her in and immediately she began challenging and healing the students through innovative acting and dance techniques.



The classes taught by the enrichment team include acting, dance, sign language, drumming, and voice, all culminating in a professional production utilizing all the children in the Arts Enrichment Program. “Whatever lesson plan we came in with, we threw it out,” Felecia says, as she explains the need to adapt lessons to what the children can do, rather than what she wants them to do. “If these kids don’t like something they won’t even try it, so we had to tailor the program to fit them.”

Felecia rewrites plays so that every student can participate and accurately perform what is being asked of them. The program also integrates sign language into the multifaceted production. “It’s like dancing with your hands,” she says, explaining that the student’s that can’t speak, sign, which unites the entire class through a communal, expressive activity.

When you walk into Felecia’s class you enter a safe haven, a place where you can shake off whatever happens outside her doors. First, Felecia helps students get outside their comfort zone. Each class begins with an exercise she’s been doing for years: students individually go on stage and state their name. This builds a routine so that when it’s show time the students aren’t scared; instead, they’re natural and assertive. But the point of these exercises is not just to ensure success on the stage; it’s to ensure success in life. Learning not to interrupt others, to maintain eye contact, to present oneself with confidence—these are all skills that translate to a successful, independent life.

At a school that doesn’t give homework, the fact that these students memorize their lines at home illuminates their true dedication and love for Felecia’s class. “It’s a miracle,” she says. “They want to be here.” So much so that they will agree to attend other classes just so they can keep going to Felecia’s. “It’s a really great motivator for our students,” Dr. Josephson says, “they get hooked on the arts and understand that they need to maintain their grades if they want to participate. For some of our students who have autism or struggle with social issues, the stage and the script is the perfect thing, and they find talents they didn’t know they had. To have an area where they’re successful is tremendously meaningful for them.”

One Vista student without language came to Felecia’s class in 2005 when he was seven years old. “Everyone thought this kid couldn’t speak and he wouldn’t, but through arts enrichment he would start singing—we didn’t even know he could sing—to see this little boy who couldn’t talk singing like an angel, tears were pouring down his face and his mother was crying in awe,” Felecia remembers. Sometimes a voice is so hidden that no one knows it’s there, but with the right amount of encouragement, and a lot of practice, voices can be discovered and nurtured. “For our kids who have a hard time expressing themselves, finding a voice is incredible,” Dr. Josephson adds.

While Felecia’s class has been teaching stage presence and confidence to students for 10 years, Deborah’s music class has been offering instrumental voices to Vista students for the past three years. Vista had no instrumental program at the time, and hired Deborah to teach general music. “There was nothing here but one guitar,” Deborah says, but soon she ignited a desire in the children to learn how to play, and with that desire, the music program began to evolve. At first, Deborah brought in her own instruments; she started with a bass guitar and keyboard. Now, after some intensive fundraising efforts and donations, the music program is stocked with instruments; they have acoustic, electric and bass guitars, keyboards, a compact drum set, digital and craft pianos, violins, percussions, a saxophone, ukulele, and a clarinet.

Classically trained in piano and voice, Deborah has taught herself numerous instruments over the years. With her special education credentials and music degree, this is her dream job. “There’s nothing I would rather do than teach music to these kids, who normally don’t have access to music education. It’s a shame because music can be so therapeutic. I feel really lucky,” she says. But clearly, Vista is lucky to have Deborah.

“I try to expose them to as much as possible,” Deborah says. But rather than teaching them how to play an instrument perfectly, her goal is to give them a voice through sound. The students get to try 90% of the instruments, and for those who have never even touched an instrument before, that’s nothing short of a miracle.

“It’s so exciting,” Deborah says. “I had a student who couldn’t speak, and she learned songs on the harp and keyboard and performed them. To see any kind of voice come out of her was really, really amazing.”

Giving students the ability to have a voice, to express themselves in some way, is more than just teaching a new skill—it’s giving something that you can never take away. A majority of the students face momentous academic and personal challenges everyday, so Deborah rearranges the keys to certain songs so the students can get immediate gratification and success. It’s one time in their day where there is no failure. It’s a time for them to connect with the energy of a captivating harmony or catchy melody and realize that they, too, are capable of producing something beautiful. ■