

you don't need a weatherman...

by susan ingalls

“**Y**ou can count on it,” said Rick, very good-looking in his impeccably cut suit. “It’s coming down the pike.

So the question for all of you is: Do you want a place at the table?” Immediately grumpy, I decided to ignore his mixed metaphor. Predictably, however, I was sitting at a table. It was the spring of 2001, and I was in one of P.A.S.E.’s (Partnership for After School Education) large meeting rooms. My anger spiking, I thought, “Open your eyes, Rick! Take a good look! We’re already seated around the table. It is the table before which you’ve been invited to speak. Furthermore, we have been at the P.A.S.E. table since 1992. In fact, now that I think about it, we’re the ones, my colleagues and I, who built the damn table you now seem to think you’re the head of.”

Susan Ingalls is the Founder and Executive Director of Children & the Classics—a New York City agency that offers technical assistance, arts resources, and direct programming to more than two dozen Community-Based Organizations in New York City. Ms. Ingalls has worked with young people after school since her graduation from college in 1967. She is currently writing a book about creating theater with children in a CBO setting.

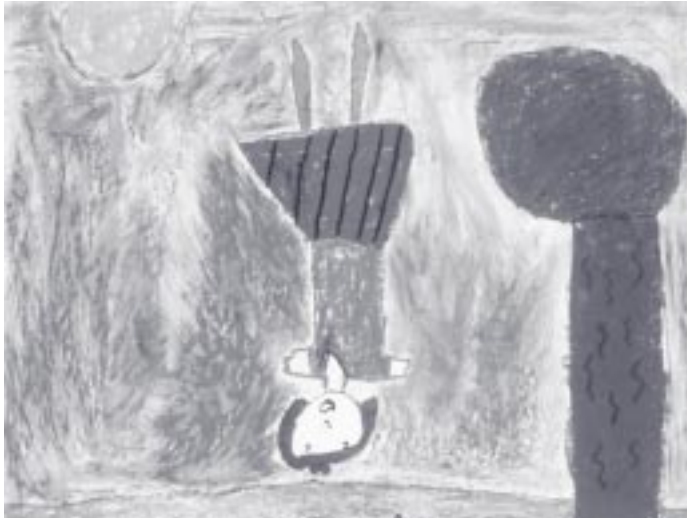
My bad mood simmered. I’m no dumb bunny. I understood that this whole conversation was political. It was, in the end, all about



Storm, Annie, age 4

power and money, and the metaphorical “table” that Rick seemed to think he controlled (and perhaps he did) was, in reality, access to state and federal funds. You see, Rick is a lobbyist. A lobbyist who is supposedly arguing on behalf of our mutual cause, which is making after school activities available to all kids throughout the United States.

But while it was safe to say that everyone at the P.A.S.E. table agreed with the broad goal of offering after school programs to all children, and while all of our agencies would welcome state and federal monies for such an expansion,



Rosemary, Brooklyn

it was in the implementation of such government mandates that my colleagues and I felt, if not outright opposition, at least some deep, time-honored reservations. The state, according to Rick, was going to issue licenses, develop requirements and create standards. I feared that, in all likelihood, standardized tests would lead to standardized preparation. Everybody would have to be fingerprinted.

I thought about getting up and walking into the alcove next to the meeting room, where I could wake up with another cup of coffee. Maybe I could drink some orange juice to raise my blood sugar. But such a move would necessitate my leaving “the table.” That choice seemed symbolically ill-advised. It was only 9:20 in the morning, and I hadn’t expected to feel as if I was sitting in a battle zone, but I did. In some ways, my colleagues and I had been like a merry band of outlaws, living for several decades in a forest primeval. But just as cutting down the trees in Brazil or drilling for oil in Alaska can seem necessary, so had I felt for the last few years the steady encroachment of “the obvious solution.” Like its need for more timber and oil, our nation needs to provide more after school programs for many, many more children. The “Reasonable Answer,” the one I knew Rick’s model advocates, is to systematically place hun-

dreds, if not thousands, of new after school programs inside existing school buildings.

The pitch of Rick and his cohorts, one which I had heard many times, went something like this: All our school buildings are empty by three o’clock in the afternoon. Children are forced to leave what in many communities is a safe space, only to wander the streets unattended; many use the time to get into trouble. The juvenile crime rate triples during the first hour after the school day ends. Eight-five percent of teenage pregnancies occur between 3 and 8 PM. Further-

more, here in New York City, 56 percent of fourth grade children are currently failing the statewide English test. The rate of illiteracy for fourth graders in some districts in this city has reached 75 percent (*NY Times*, May 20, 2000). We need to turn this disaster around. By running after school programs in schools, taught by certified staff, we might have a chance. The children are already in the building. If school buses take the kids home, the buses could just leave a few hours later.

Our schools are valuable assets, and they should be used 24/7. They should be the center of the community, not closed, remote citadels. Schools should teach children during the day but at night offer square-dancing classes for senior citizens, cooking classes for new mothers and computer classes for the unemployed. Closing schools at 3:00 made sense when the United States was largely rural, with a more agrarian economy. Young people no longer need to help plant the crops or assist with the harvest. Those days are long gone.

What we need now, in the 21st century, this new millennium, are schools that help us compete in the global economy. We need year-round schooling. We need extended school days. Sixteen studies begun early in the 1970s show that during the ten weeks that children are out of

school during the summer, they lose significant academic ground. For some youngsters this lost ground can amount to as much as a half a year's work. Summer vacations are a logistical nightmare, especially now that there are so many families with either the single parent or both parents working full time.

The "Rick argument" is a powerful one, and because it contains many truths, it's nearly impossible to counter. The solution he advocates—to dramatically increase after school programs by placing them in our nation's existing school buildings—is no longer just the handwriting on the wall; it now represents policies being passed into law. Like the emergence of HMOs to handle our nation's health care, Rick's vision for the future is understandable, if not inevitable.

But what Rick didn't quite understand that spring morning was that he was giving his speech to 20 leaders of Community-Based Organizations (CBOs), leaders who run neighborhood centers that are currently providing the lion's share of after school programs, summer camps, arts and recreation programs not only throughout New York City but also across our entire nation. Those of us at the P.A.S.E. table run centers that are physically, and often psychologically, quite separate from schools. In some cases, like those of New York City's settlement houses, agencies have been creating their own identities for more than a hundred years. Therefore, we are a group of leaders who will fight for our agencies to preserve the character and the culture we have created within our own buildings. We do not want what we value to be left out or ignored. Rick didn't understand that his position was going to be challenged, and that for some of us, it will be a long contentious fight, during which we will draw blood, even if we do not prevail. There is no place in that fight for a freshly pressed suit.

Looking back, to be perfectly honest, the main reason I had found Rick's presentation so objectionable wasn't his style or his dress; the real source of my anger was myself. Like a sailor who hadn't paid enough attention to changes in the currents, shifts in the breeze or a drop in the barometer, I had seen the signs, but these signals hadn't led me to chart a new course.

For me, the first indication of the approaching conflict was the introduction of the Beacons After School Programs in the mid-1990s. The Beacons were located in schools, but designed to be run by Community-Based Organizations. This worried me. I feared that "down the pike" the CBOs might become too cumbersome or too expensive, and eventually be dropped, the expertise of the leaders lost. I worried that, without the attentive, seasoned leadership of people like Michele Cahill, who was instrumental in the creation of the Beacons, the integrity of the Beacons programs might erode. My biggest fear

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was that once situated inside school buildings, after school programs would eventually be taken over by the public school system. This same concern followed with the next wave of change, the introduction of the after school programs run within schools by the YMCAs of Greater New York.

Our company, Children & the Classics, was asked to be one of the primary trainers of the staff that the YMCA was hiring for their new initiative, dubbed "The Virtual Y." Again, the leadership from the Ys was experienced, fun, well organized and optimistic. Yet, even while Children & the Classics worked very hard to give all the new youth workers the techniques and resources to do theater activities with kids,

I personally never understood the whole concept behind the Virtual Ys. What I have always loved about the Y, the old McBurney Y on 23rd

. . . The image of a broad, slow-moving river entered my mind. I saw the banks, filled with lush trees and dense flowering shrubs, mysterious and verdant. I floated by, apparently on a raft. . . .

Street being the one I know best, is that they always centered on sports and exercise. To me, Ys are primarily about swimming pools and weight rooms, basketball courts, indoor tracks and even saunas and steam rooms. So I never got it. Virtual means, “existing or resulting in essence or effect, though not in actual fact.” But I saw very little of the essence of what I loved about programs at the Y in the public school classrooms where the new youth workers we had trained ended up teaching.

Because the mission of Children & the Classics is to propagate the wonderful artistic, academic and psychological benefits that occur when kids are engaged in theater, our company happily accepted all the training opportunities, along with the generous financial remuneration, that the YMCA offered us. But in the end, I was left feeling empty, sad and off-track. Long ago, when the organization was young, it was a Y leader who put up empty peach baskets at two ends of a field and invented basketball, and at another Y, volleyball was invented. I wondered how activities in a classroom, even the very good ones our company was supplying, did justice to that proud heritage. There was one moment, during the use of theater games, in which the deepest character of the Y’s “twenty kids in a room with a ball” philosophy was almost honored. But that room, by my thinking, should have been empty of desks and chairs. And of course, it wasn’t.

Way back in 1998, if I had been even mildly vigilant, I would have foreseen that this

movement in New York—locating after school programs in public school buildings, started by the Beacons, followed by the Virtual Ys and ultimately joined by that colossus, The After School Corporation (T.A.S.C.)—would soon be accepted as the model for the rest of the country. But at that time any possible consequences for the small, independent CBOs failed to register.

While I was attending P.A.S.E.’s sixth annual conference in 2000, a second, even scarier assault on the freedom and independence of after school activities was proposed.

Essentially a professional development forum for after school educators, the annual P.A.S.E. conference started in 1995. It is a wonderful, unique opportunity for peers to share and train with one another. At the P.A.S.E. conference in May 2000, there were over 600 people attending more than 50 workshops. A few years after the one-day conference was established, we added a second day for symposia and panels, where academics, researchers, foundation staff and government leaders could meet with field practitioners to discuss and debate the issues driving youth development and after school education.

The 2000 symposium was located in the Puck Building; Angeliki, my assistant and I, arriving late, had missed the introduction, but the keynote speaker was Dr. Warren Simmons, Executive Director of the Annenberg Institute for School Reform at Brown University. Settling into a chair near the back of the room, I turned my full attention to Dr. Simmons, who had begun to speak.

Dr. Simmons talked about the need for communities, and the need for organizations in those communities to build better relationships with their local schools. He talked about connecting the activities in after school learning

environments to in-school activities. He cautioned that our work was to make these connections between CBOs and schools happen in a way that would help students, not make them schizophrenic by creating too many outcomes to be reached in too many different ways.

Then Dr. Simmons began to talk about the history of the standards movement between 1983 and 1990. He recalled when the reformers pinpointed the basic issue: Schools serving poor minority children were staffed by less qualified teachers. As Dr. Simmons spoke, *the image of a broad, slow-moving river entered my mind. I saw the banks, filled with lush trees and dense flowering shrubs, mysterious and verdant. I floated by, apparently on a raft.* “Minority students are most often the last to be enrolled in college preparatory classes,” he said. *Mist was lifting from my river like in a 19th-century Bingham painting.* “Standards were developed to clarify what students should know.” *My raft moved slowly downstream. Ahead, a fish jumped out of the water and arched back down.*

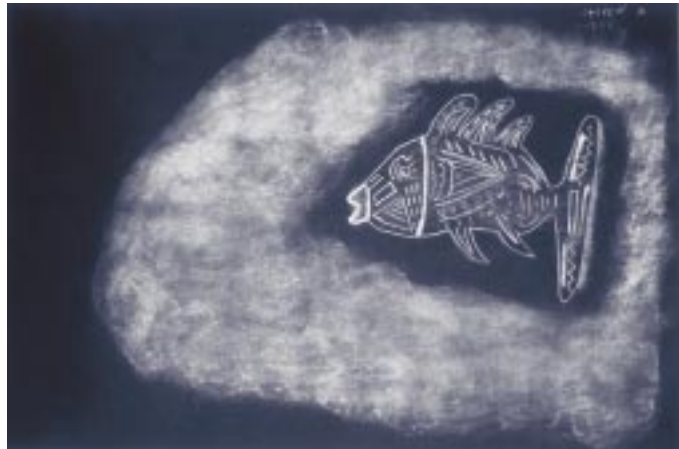
But standards alone were not adequate. Standardized tests would provide, for both students and teachers, an indicator of where they needed to improve. *Immediate sounds of water lapping, birds singing, the distant drone of the cicadas. The brown muddy water, I now knew, was the Mississippi. Community arts. That’s what I am—a community artist, who has, over a thirty-year period, created a body of work by engaging hundreds and hundreds of children as my partners. Working outside the curricula, the standards, and even the school buildings. Working together, the kids and I invented scores of magical worlds, one after the other. It was within these worlds of William Shakespeare, Charles Dickens, Maya Angelou, Lewis Carroll, Langston Hughes and Mark Twain that we all advanced our knowledge, humor and compassion.*

The sound of clapping hands brought me back into the symposium just in time to hear

Dr. Simmons conclude that the biggest mistake of the educational reformers was to emphasize accountability through high-stakes testing without providing capacity-building. Here he was indicating that in this area of preparing students for these critical tests, after school programs could, and should, play a vital role.

Like Dr. Simmons, the next speaker, Jane Quinn, Assistant Executive Director of the Children’s Aid Society, explained that after school programs had the opportunity to harmonize “the principles of the best youth work practices with the best of academic standards.” Ms. Quinn gave as an example a cooking club that CBOs could offer to third graders. In such a club, at least fifteen of the promotion standards for third grade could be met while still focusing on the best practices in youth development. Ms. Quinn talked about creating “serious fun” for all of New York City’s young people.

I was relieved to hear the final panelist, Dr. Eric Schaps, the president of the Developmental Studies Center in Oakland, California, say



Steven, grade 3, Queens

that while he backed the new academic standards, he also did not like the high-stakes testing. In Dr. Schaps’s opinion, such testing “impoverished education” for most children and left teachers feeling pressured to “teach to the test.”

When the panel ended, Angeliki and I slipped out to a nearby eatery. Angeliki, my

multi-talented assistant who had only two years earlier graduated from N.Y.U., ordered something vegetarian. I remember an overwhelming urge to order something deeply alcoholic, but instead I ordered a rather plain iced tea to accompany my B.L.T. and fries. After the food arrived, we talked about the symposium. I knew the mental state I was in, and it was an uncomfortable one; it was as though some horrible riddle that I couldn't quite name, and therefore couldn't examine or resolve, had settled into my brain to torture me. Seeking relief, I said, perhaps a bit too cheerfully, "Well—that's your first P.A.S.E. symposium. What did you think?"

One of the characteristics about Angeliki that I love the most, in addition to her contagious sense of humor, is that she is extremely thoughtful. Angeliki is not afraid to slow down and think. I sipped my iced tea, munched on a corner of my perfect sandwich, and waited.

"Well, for a conference that is supposed to be about what kids do once the school day ends, it seemed to me—and maybe I missed something because we were late—but it seemed to me that all the speeches were about schools and what the schools needed. The whole thing seemed to be about how we all needed to help the schools."

"BINGO!" I thought, "Oh, Bingo! Bingo! Bingo!" My young, ingenious assistant had just named, and therefore resolved, the mental tickle that had been tormenting me for more than an hour.

"I'm sure the schools do need help," continued Angeliki sympathetically. "Maybe I just don't understand what after school activities are supposed to be doing."

"Well, without any biased coaching from me," I said, "what does it mean to you—your own experience—what do you think about it?"

Again, a long pause.

"Well, to me, and this is just me, after school means you leave school. You leave school and you go somewhere else, like Vicki Lynn's School of Dance."

"Like where?" I asked, as if Angeliki had slipped into a foreign tongue.

"Vicki Lynn's School of Dance," said Angeliki brightly. "That's where I took jazz dance two days a week, from fourth to sixth grade, when we lived in Dayton."

I was due back at the symposium, but I delayed returning just long enough to hear the juicy lowdown about Vicki Lynn's: a long rectangular building in a strip mall; one big room that could be divided into three rooms, two

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medium and one small; jazz, tap, ballet and acrobatics; Angeliki's first glimpse of her costume in a catalog. The costumes arrived a few weeks before the big presentation, and hers was unbelievably exciting--hot pink with golden sequins, fringe, and tassels. But once it was determined that your costume fit, you had to carefully place it back in the box until the show. For The Big Night, Vicki Lynn rented a large "Broadway" auditorium in Dayton. Then each class performed their numbers, one after another, each with separate bows. The evening ended as all the proud moms and some dads took lots and lots of photographs. Then Angeliki and her friends, still in costume, went out for ice cream.

As I got up to return to the panel discussion back at the Puck Building, I asked Angeliki one last question: "Would it have made any difference if you had been able to do your dancing in the school building, but still after school?"

"I would never have done my jazz dance at school," replied Angeliki, momentarily reacting as though I had asked her to do something obscene.

Startled by the immature passion of her reaction, I asked, "Why not?" "Because all my friends would have seen me trying."

“But you went to Vicky Lynn’s with your friends.”

“Just two,” said Angeliki.

Looking back, I am amazed at my blissful disregard of the changing breezes. Although that first tack, placing community-run programs in schools at the end of the academic day, had its psychological and environmental drawbacks, it also had advantages. When done well, the Beacons, YMCAs and TASC were reaching out and providing hundreds of new after school opportunities to thousands upon thousands of young people. Even though that’s not what my agency wants to do, I am grateful for those who genuinely love teaching and creating within this structure. Furthermore, my company is now firmly dedicated to providing agencies that do this work with magical resources to help them stay on the course they have set for themselves.

The second tack, however, foreshadowed a major storm raging in my mind. The new direction—urging community educators and youth workers to adopt and advance activities to support the new academic standards and thereby help kids to pass the new standardized tests—while again seeming useful, ironically, triggered deep resistance in me. I say ironically because Children & the Classics is dedicated to teaching children through the use of complex core texts. Our projects immerse young people in the English language. All of our newest initiatives are dedicated to making sure that participants acquire not only a sense of mastery but an actual mastery of the English language. Furthermore, we prove our methods through vigorous evaluations, which will soon include tests based on the much-touted new English standards.

So, at the symposium in 2000 and again in 2001 (when the topic was evaluation of after school programs), I was still floating along with the misconception that all of these new directions that were being talked about were ideas that I could accept or reject. But the meeting with Rick blew away all such illusions. Rick

made it clear that in the future, if you want to be legal, if you want government monies, these new guidelines in after school education were going to be mandatory.

This forecast for the future left me feeling unmoored. Later, in early July, I picked up the phone and arranged a date with Rodney Fuller, co-director (with Andrew Rubinson) of Fresh Youth Initiatives. I had never visited Rodney’s agency, located in the Washington Heights–Inwood section of Manhattan. However, I needed some cheering up, and FYI was doing something that truly excited me. In this era of migration into school buildings, FYI was instead raising money to build its own center on the site of an illegal poultry farm, known as a *vivero* in Spanish.

We agreed on an early breakfast meeting, and even at 8:30 in the morning, there were three kids on Rodney’s doorstep. After a quick tour of FYI’s current facilities, a six-room apartment in a large building on 172nd Street, Rodney tucked his blueprints under his arm, and we headed to a local restaurant.

Just outside the door, we met two girls, introduced to me as Maria, who had done 300 hours of community service, and Yvette, who had completed an astounding 1200 hours. Rodney hugged both girls, each about 14 or 15 years old. He checked their schedule for the day, noting when he would next touch base with them. As we walked up the block, we passed large planters full of flowers, planters which had been built and painted by kids from FYI, giving the long block not only a wonderful and unique look, but also sending out an almost magical signal to all passers-by that, on this block, people cared.

This same sense of community caring extended into the adjacent street, with a large colorful mural on a nearby building and a small community garden, where Jose (who had 450 hours) worked with Tequesha and Lafonda (625 and 475 hours) and with newcomer Violette (a mere 80 hours). Rodney and I chatted briefly with the supervisor of the community gardeners, and I peered appreciatively at small green

shoots destined to become prizeworthy green beans one day.

Arriving at the restaurant, we took a booth towards the rear and ordered breakfast. Then I sat back, waiting to be fortified. I was hungry not only for my newly arriving scrambled eggs and bacon, but for a new perspective, for fresh energy. Why did I care? Why was I threatened? And what propelled this next generation on a similar journey?

Rodney, enthusiastic and energetic, is a social worker with a clear passion for youth empowerment. He talked about meaning. How does an agency with its own vision express what that vision means? According to Rodney, “You establish meaning by really digging your roots in, being a part of the community, becoming a fixture. The most obvious thing we could do to achieve this was to erect a building. From the time I was an undergrad, I thought about doing the exact same kind of job that we do here at FYI, and I always thought about having my own space in which to do it.”

As if in a deep summer rain, I soak in Rodney’s words. We finish eating and order more tea and coffee. The dishes are removed, and out come the blueprints. I thought about the trail of renovations, major and minor, I had left behind: the conversion of a former hair salon, a parking garage, a former restaurant, a storefront, a lumber mill and, finally, the most current renovation in the loft of Children & the Classics on West 17th Street.

But Rodney wasn’t just renovating. He was building from the ground up, four stories tall. Looking at each blueprint, Rodney talked about open entrances, murals and workstations. Skylights which would illuminate places without windows. There would be a living room, a food pantry, storage rooms, multi-purpose spaces and a rooftop terrace for outdoor gatherings. He concluded by talking about providing space to help incubate new programs that other people in the community might like to start.

After breakfast we visited the site. After those beautiful blueprints, the actual building was a bit of a shock. What a dump! I marveled at Rodney’s ability to see beyond a boarded-up eyesore, while Rodney marveled at everyone who had joined in to help: The \$600,000 that had already been raised through private house parties in Washington Heights; the award-win-

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ning architect who had been attracted to the project; and so many more. The entire new building, which requires the demolition of the abandoned chicken ranch, will cost \$2.5 million. Now he only had half a million left to raise.

“I’ve been blessed in the work I do,” said Rodney as we walked back to the current location of Fresh Youth Initiatives. Almost everyone we passed—kids, parents, and old people alike—knew Rodney, said hello or exchanged some bit of information with him. As I hugged Rodney goodbye, next to the expectant flowers in their made-to-order planters, I couldn’t help but think that for Washington Heights-Inwood, the blessings went both ways.

When it comes to children, it is our job as adults to provide and protect. But it’s also our job to remember. To remember, if we can, childhood and the stages children move through on their way out into adulthood. We need to insist that children in our care receive the best that life can give them, and we need to protect those rare and wonderful differences between children and adults.

The current solution of placing the majority of new after school programs in school buildings poses a clear threat. In a time of increasing budgetary constraints, it is the cheap answer. Furthermore, the projected academic advantages and the convenience of keeping kids in schools after the official school day ends is an easy sell to lawmakers. What politician wouldn’t

promote the idea of a “Virtual Y?” Who would want to take on the more difficult task of giving the *actual Ys real money* to build *genuine* centers that serve hundreds of thousands of kids with the Y’s *truest* programs?

Most young people are already in school buildings for about seven hours each day. While not every school is based on this factory model, it would be fair to say that most are. The halls are long and the classrooms march on, left and right. The physical plant is often in disrepair, but even if children attend a well-maintained facility with gleaming tiles and polished linoleum, after seven hours they can use a change of scenery.

For high school students it is critical to offer a supportive academic environment after school, but staying in the same physical space for an extra three to six hours is not the best or only solution. Ideally, older students would go to programs tailored to their interests, in spaces specifically geared to this kind of support. The excitement kindled by success in any one discipline radiates outward—influencing that young person’s entire perspective.

Younger children have an innate need to play. Even the most unobservant adult would be forced to admit this most obvious truth. Universally, at 3 o’clock in the afternoon, when grade school children leave their school buildings, they shout and scream with joy.

Do they hate school? Not necessarily, but they relish that moment of freedom. The very best after school programs build upon this desire to explore and discover.

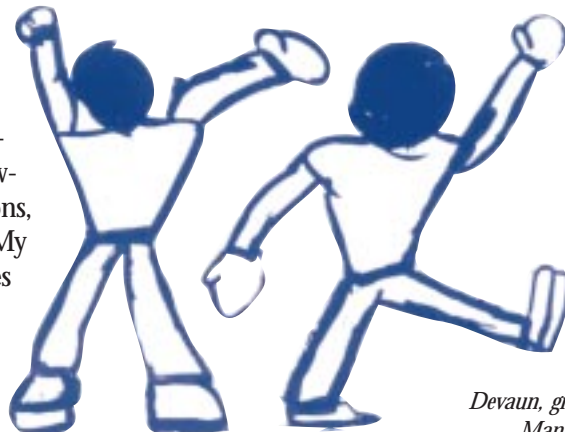
Songwriter Bob Dylan says, “You don’t need a weatherman to know which way the wind blows.” Unfortunately, right now I believe an ill wind is blowing against Community-Based Organizations, particularly the small, independent ones. My fear, plain and simple, is that the activities and cultures in neighborhood centers, often developed indigenously and without school-centered vocabularies, might be carelessly blown away.

As these cultures disappear, so do the unique visions and the expertise of the independent artists and teachers who make them happen. Whether our visions become empires like the Girl Scouts (which began with just eighteen girls in Georgia) or focus on a smaller scale like Fresh Youth Initiatives, they are unique, valuable resources. We need to insist that CBOs, which provide opportunities for kids outside of schools, are honored and protected.

Pushed by the wind, I go back to my river and my raft. Here I raise a sail, and I encourage others to do likewise. Now I will use the wind in my sail to power a new course. Insist. Teach what you love. Insist. Do a pirouette. Insist. Fly a kite. Insist. Paint pictures, make puppets, wear bright orange wigs. Insist. Dance a jig, write a hip-hop song, shoot some photos. Insist. Insist that kids need environments other than school buildings in which to play, and grow, and transform.

Finally, insist on going back to the basics: Encourage kids to be persistent, to ask for help and to learn how to help others. Provide kids with experiences that require concentration. Allow them to learn the advantages of being organized and to enjoy the messy process of creation. Encourage them to speak from experience and to value insight gained through participation. Help kids figure out their goals, and let them see how long it takes to accomplish something.

After kids learn all this, passing standardized tests will be a snap.



*Devaun, grade 4,
Manhattan*