

Youth in Arts®

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CONTACT: Cathy Bowman
(415) 279-1788
cathy@youthinarts.org



YIArts.COR: A SMALL TEAM'S BIG SOLUTION

When the coronavirus pandemic hit, Youth in Arts Executive Director Kristen Jacobson had to think fast. Onsite school programming – the lifeblood of the organization – halted abruptly. The office closed temporarily. Jacobson and her small staff began live streaming free videos from their kitchens, living rooms and backyards. The short videos – even the fuzzy ones with a barking dog or a crying child – were popular with desperate parents, and they became the foundation of something far bigger.

In two months, Youth in Arts put together YIArts.COR, a new digital learning platform. It features visual and performing arts programs designed to reach any learner, anywhere. Many of those lessons build on the videos shot in the early days of school closures when everyone was trying to figure out how to homeschool and work at the same time.

“The online experience has been challenging for us, as I’m sure for many other families,” said Karen Martinez, an emergency room nurse who has just started using YIArts.COR to enrich her children’s education. “Needless to say, I’m exhausted.”

YIArts.COR (Creative Online Resource) offers free and low-cost programs that teachers, parents and students can access anywhere, anytime. Looking for an art lesson on flowers for your 2nd grade classroom? How about a dance lesson to get your 4th grader moving? It’s available at www.yiartscor.com.

“YIArts.COR is the intersection of technology, accessibility, equity and the arts,” Jacobson said. “Youth in Arts is a small, community-based organization, but YIArts.COR is a big solution to keep arts in the school day for students, schools and families.”

More than 12 courses are already available for K-12 students, with more on the way. Each course includes at least four sequential lessons that build on skills learned the previous week. Topics include Seeds and Flowers, Afro-Peruvian Dance and Architecture at Home. The supplies are intentionally kept simple.

Youth in Arts is also setting up a system to make it possible to buy a course as a gift for a friend, or family in need. Beyond the short courses, schools around the country can choose longer, more in-depth digital courses tailored for them by the Youth in Arts team.

There's been a great upside: The Marin County, CA nonprofit has been able to teach more than 4,000 students online in San Rafael and other districts – double the number it typically reaches each Fall. Many of the students Youth in Arts is now reaching received little or no visual arts or dance education before school closures.

“Teaching online has allowed us to extend our programming beyond what we could have dreamed of,” Jacobson said. “While it isn't the same as being in class, it is vital that students have a way to express themselves and share their voices during these challenging times.”

One fan is Kindergarten teacher David Peterson, who works in San Rafael City Schools – one of the districts that has used YIArts.COR.

On a typical day, he has his iPad, computer and projector all going, with multiple tabs open to have the materials he needs. He says that online teaching demands mean running on three to four hours of sleep.

“Teachers during the pandemic are definitely modern superheroes,” he said. “There's no question about it.”

The arts, Peterson said, have been crucial in keeping kids engaged. In class he uses his Gretsch Jim Dandy guitar to help his students practice letter sounds. But he can't do it alone.

“Youth in Arts has definitely been a fantastic resource for my students,” Peterson said. “They're excited to go on and dance. They're excited to go on and learn the next art lesson.”

“Art is necessary in our daily lives to create balance,” he said, adding that his own interest in music started at the age of 5. “It engages students. It creates smiles and it provokes thought. That's why I include it every day and encourage my students to do it everyday as well.”

Along with how-to videos, written instructions in English and Spanish are available to ensure that lessons are accessible – key for schools like the one where Peterson teaches, where many students are English Language Learners.

Youth in Arts has served more than a million children since it was founded nearly 50 years ago. To provide the richest experience possible, staff have been scouring the web to find additional resources to compliment the online courses.

“Artists are creating amazing content everywhere,” said Visual Arts Director Suzanne Joyal. “This world of virtual learning gives us the opportunity to share the work of those artists with students and celebrate the amazing work we have discovered.”

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