



The Slope-based Meltdown performance group gave a show at the Seventh Heaven street fair on Seventh Avenue on Sunday.

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# Art group helps teens avoid tragic Meltdowns

By Rose Palazzolo  
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Staying alive was the whole point to Bronwyn Rucker when she and Rick Russo formed the art troupe Meltdown, Inc. in Park Slope more than 10 years ago.

The two were groping to live as working artists and developed Meltdown, Inc. in an effort to showcase their own work. Three years later, in 1986, Meltdown turned into a combination social work organization and arts organization when Rucker became concerned about teen suicide. Meltdown, located at 346 Flatbush Avenue, became more than just a vehicle to produce their own art but a saviour to many teens.

"I knew that art kept me from jumping off bridges many times," Rucker said. "It's a valuable tool to get to difficult issues. Working with a population that is underexposed to art was really important. The goal was to bring the experience to others."

Art is the fastest tool to self-expression, according to Rucker, and the very population that could benefit from the healing qualities of self-expression through the arts, teenagers, are also one of the most underserved populations. Public schools have cut back drastically on art programs. The teens involved in Meltdown write their own stories into plays and scenes and perform them at street fairs, festivals and community centers. Alcohol and drug abusers from 15-years-old to 50 get involved in productions.

Russo and Rucker started performing at outdoor festivals and community events around Brooklyn in 1983. Then in 1986 Rucker started working with teens

because of her concern about teen suicide.

To gain legitimacy Rucker went to Hunter College and attained a degree in Social Work. Once she was a certified social worker, though, the academics didn't consider the Meltdown work seriously and artists didn't consider it art.

"Art in today's society is still elitist," Rucker said. "There is a tendency to trivialize the arts. The down side of the work is that because we are bridging gaps [between art and therapy] to social workers it's not social work and to artists it's not art."

The focus of the work since 1986 has been violence prevention and education, according to Rucker. With the added knowledge her social work degree gave her Rucker has been able to create theater peer productions involving teen suicide, rape, racism, violence and domestic abuse.

Social work theater is about making your own antidotes through self-expression in the arts, Rucker said. Self-esteem and respect are part of the trail of that antidote.

"I knew what had made a difference in my life was art," Rucker said. "It had given it great value and meaning. It is very appropriate for expressing identity struggles. Suicide is about as violent as one can get with one self. The question was how do you channel that energy?"

First, the energy has to be expelled and with that comes an actual physical change in the body which is just as important as the verbal communication, according to Rucker. With the expulsion of emotion a rush of hormones, endorphins and blood flow tricks a depressive mind into believing it's happy.

"You take the anger and get it out there

and share it with others," Rucker said. "I always tell people to go for the anger and go for the conflict. It makes good art, whereas, in society they tell you to not express the anger. There is also a communication process that happens. When you share it you get it back from the audience. Everybody participates in the process."

Besides working with teens, Meltdown works with parents and children involved in abusive relationships. Three years ago Rucker went to the Park Slope Armory and created "Voices of the Armory," a play performed and written by the homeless women who live at the shelter.

"We wanted to let them know that not everyone in the neighborhood was against them," said Rucker. "We started doing acting scenes and a lot of the stories had to do with the women being beaten down by the system and life, and substance abuse."

Rucker worked with the women for three months. They wrote a script using the women's stories and then filmed it. She planned to present the film to the community but found it difficult to find an audience.

"There were some people who didn't quite get it," Rucker said. "I was never successful in getting the community to watch it. Last year when there was continued controversy I thought I'd try to present it again but nobody came."

What Rucker now sees as her own failed advocacy work she still sees as good art, though. Currently, she is working with teens throughout Community Board 2, Downtown, Feet Greene, Clinton Hill and Brooklyn Heights and Community Board 6, Park Slope, Carroll Gardens, Cobble Hill, Red Hook and Gowanus. The teens are trained to be peer educators and help take the program throughout the borough