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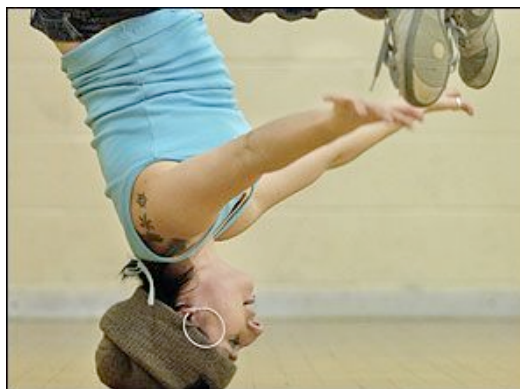
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Breaking new ground

Unique after-school program uses the arts to help Rexdale kids find their way As a bonus, it's even uniting the area's many cultures, reports Louise Brown

May 3, 2006. 01:00 AM



RICK MADONIK/TORONTO STAR

At a school gym in Rexdale this week, a diverse handful of teens is using breakdancing to break down racial barriers.

Although breakdancing didn't start in Asia, Pakistan-born Anhum Shafiq figures it should be part of his school's Asian show if an Asian student is doing the dancing.

"Last year, when we wanted to perform breakdancing at our school's Asian assembly, they said we had to do a traditional Indian dance first. But the breakdancing was the biggest hit," said Shafiq, 19, a Grade 12 student enrolled in this unusual after-school program for students in high-risk parts of Etobicoke.

Eva Nikicova, a.k.a. Mae Hem, demonstrates a free headstand at a breakdancing workshop this week at North Albion Collegiate Institute. The 13-week after-school program is part of urbanNOISE, which gives young people in Rexdale a chance to experience everything from graffiti art and video production to songwriting and breakdancing.

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In the schools of this diverse city, where cultures mix and morph like a lava lamp, young Canadians are redrawing the lines of cultural identity.

"This year, we can do the breakdancing at the Asian assembly without the



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Indian dance," said Shafiq, who moved to Canada three years ago. He will graduate this year from North Albion Collegiate Institute and then study forensics at the University of Windsor.

Shafiq is one of 135 teens from Etobicoke's sometimes-troubled Rexdale and Jamestown neighbourhoods taking part in a 13-week series of edgy programs in breakdancing and graffiti art, spoken word and video production, songwriting and "beat-boxing" — making rhythmic sounds with your mouth.

The students plan to stage a three-day festival in the early summer.

The free program, called urbanNOISE, is jointly sponsored by community arts council Arts Etobicoke and a non-profit group called Expect Theatre. It will cost about \$1 million over three years, much of the money being raised from charitable foundations.

Organizers say there is a clear demand for after-school programs in this part of Toronto.

"The kids we work with have fantastic potential, but because of where they live, they often have more opportunity to join gangs or get into trouble than take part in the arts. There just aren't enough programs and aren't enough spaces," said Laura Mullin of urbanNOISE.

"When we ran an arts program two years ago here, kids were crying when it was over, so we've decided to run a program every year."

Arts Etobicoke helps find funding because "parts of north Etobicoke are generally underserved with respect to art education," executive director Louise Garfield said. "We saw how frustrated young people were two years ago when our program ended and there was nothing to replace it."

Shafiq took part in that program two years ago when he was very new to Canada.

"I was pretty nervous at first. I'm from Pakistan and I didn't really know how to talk to a black kid or a white kid. What do you say? But when we were all backstage working on the show — people from different schools, different races, different cultures; some performing Irish dance, some doing hip hop, some doing African dances — it was nice to get more comfortable with each other."

Grade 11 student Nathan Debattista said the programs offer a constructive alternative to "hanging out with friends or doing homework. It's a nice break from everyday life."

To Grade 9 student Karan Gill, programs like these would be good "everywhere in Toronto, because there are problems everywhere, not just Rexdale."

"I feel safe here. If you want violence, it will come to you.

`` But if you try to avoid it, you can."

Anhum Shafiq also feels safe in Rexdale — to a point.

"I only got robbed once, but I would be careful where I go at night. I feel safe living here, but I don't mess around."

For Grade 11 student Zimron Guadeloup, there's a less lofty reason for taking the course.

"I want to be able to surprise the crowd at parties. They should put these courses in school.

`` You get to learn stuff you can show off."

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