

June 29, 2008

IDEA pays off as Camden arts group moves to bigger digs

Cynthia Primas had an idea 12 years ago. Why not create a non-profit arts group to promote a creative arts high school in Camden, Primas asked herself.

That idea led Primas to found the non-profit Institute for the Development of Education in the Arts (IDEA). Once the Camden Creative Arts High School was formed, she began using the non-profit group to bring arts classes to schools and sponsor after-school programs and summer camps for children.

After working out of offices in West Jersey Hospital and the Waterfront Technology Building, Primas has moved IDEA to the former South Jersey Performing Arts Center in the Susquehanna Bank Center. The SJPAC went dark in 2005 after the New Jersey Legislature terminated funding.

Primas turned the lights back on June 23. A week later, IDEA opened its doors to a pair of summer programs: the City Kids Production Company and the Jazz Camp. "We've traveled a long road to get here," she says from her new office in the Susquehanna Bank Center. "All the trials and tribulations were priceless gifts that helped me to become a better human being."

Primas adds, "That's what the arts do. They provide self-discipline and self-motivation, and they encourage collaboration and team work."

In addition to Primas, IDEA has a three-member staff: production manager David Goodman, program director Diane Davis and executive assistant Marta Quant. Pitching in to help are several college interns.

The New Jersey Economic Development Authority helped arrange a lease for the office space and 128-seat black-box theater. Primas credits Curt Voss, Susquehanna's general manager, and the presenting group Live Nation for their support. The Annie E. Casey Foundation has provided vital help in moving Primas' program to the Waterfront. She also credits Tom Riley of Comcast Communications and managers at the Susquehanna Bank for their encouragement and help.

IDEA programs include Stand Up for the Arts (SUFTA), which brings school children together in structured educational programs. Working with artists, the students produce music, drama, modern dance, poetry and videos.

Primas says the move to the Susquehanna Bank Center broadens the horizons for IDEA. She hopes it can provide art classes, after-school arts programs, exhibits and conferences, a multimedia production studio for video recording and a jazz-brunch coffee house. "There are so many things we can do here," she says. "Our goal is to make it a focal point for arts and culture in Camden and the surrounding area. We're hoping people will volunteer and add their voices to the planning. We want the people of Camden to visualize what can be done here."

She lives in Cherry Hill with her husband, Theo, a jazz musician and record producer. Their son,

Jamil, 14, plays jazz piano.

Primas grew up in a safe African-American community in Atlantic City. Her parents valued education and the arts -- she studied both the violin and piano. Her mother, Lucille Wallace, took up art studies at the age of 68. She became so skilled, her work was featured in an exhibition. Primas' brother, Henry Wallace, is a commercial artist. Her sister, Henrietta Shelton, serves as president of the Chicken Bone Beach Historical Foundation in Atlantic City.

"There were role models in the neighborhood -- doctors and lawyers and businessmen. We felt secure and happy. There was support from every direction. Sadly, that does not exist in the lives of many children in Camden.

"My role is to develop myself and give back to the community, to use the arts to heal. You have to be a role model every day, to encourage and guide young people.

"Here at IDEA, we become brothers and sisters to the kids. We develop a bond and nurture camaraderie with them."

She calls the move "an amazing opportunity" for the residents of Camden. She hopes IDEA can implement the cultural plan for the City of Camden, created in 2004 with the support of the New Jersey State Council on the Arts. Since then, the plan has remained in limbo. "People who live in Camden need this facility. They need a place to experience beauty and culture and understanding. They need a place in the city where they can feel inspired."
