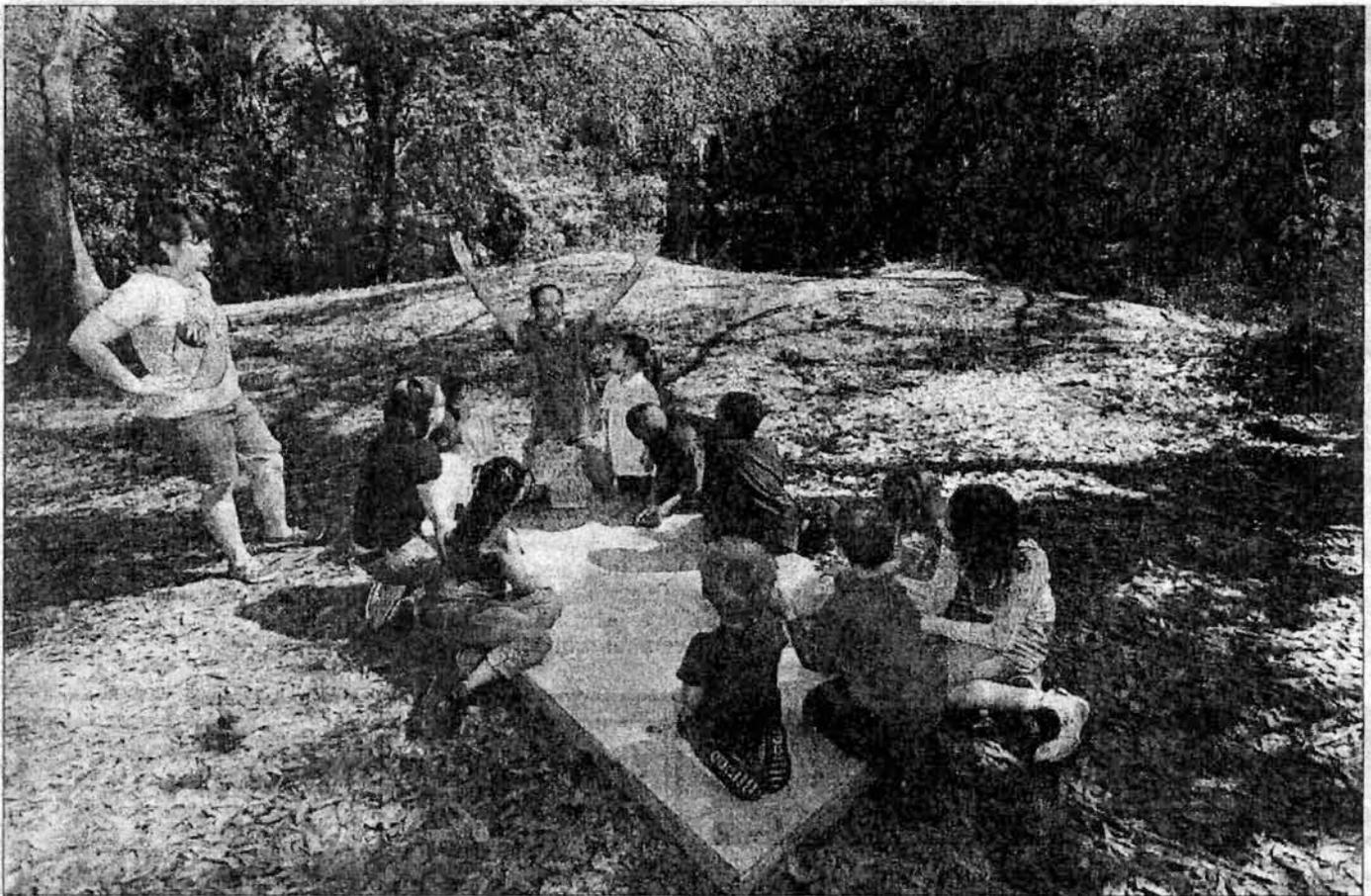


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CENTRAL TAMPA NEWS & TRIBUNE

SERVING CENTRAL TAMPA AND SURROUNDING COMMUNITIES



Tribune photo by MICHAEL SPOONEYBARGER

Arts program leader Ed Ross works with students on a clay project in River Cove Park, across from the Community Stepping Stones facility in Sulphur Springs. The house that serves as the program's headquarters is facing a hurdle because of zoning issues.

Stepping Out

It's not just clay that's being molded at Community Stepping Stones; the neighborhood arts program also seeks to shape young lives.

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Cont...

A Rock And A Hard Place



Tribune photos by MICHAEL SPOONEYBARGER

Yvenel Casseide, 15, discusses his sketch with Anastasia Harmon, 12, and University of South Florida student Emily Hovet, 25, at Community Stepping Stones, an art program that reaches out to children in Sulphur Springs, one of Tampa's poorest neighborhoods. The nonprofit organization's house is not zoned for such a use.

The success of the Community Stepping Stones program for youngsters creates a problem because of its location.

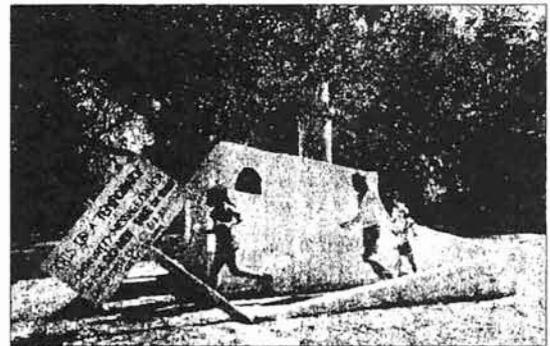
By KATHY STEELE
The Tampa Tribune

SULPHUR SPRINGS — Hands patted squares of clay. "Two pats like you're patting a dog," Ed Ross said. "And then turn the clay and pat it again until I tell you it's perfect."

Perfect meant round and ready to pop onto a thumb and screw a deep hole into the soft clay. Tiny fingers then made crablike pinches and watched the hole widen into wondrous shapes — bowls with rough edges, flower-petal rims or drooping sides.

About a dozen children made the pinch pots last weekend, a lesson from Ross on art and nature. Every Saturday is art day for Community Stepping Stones at River Cove Park, a city pocket park on the Hillsborough River.

Across the street at the nonprofit organization's home,

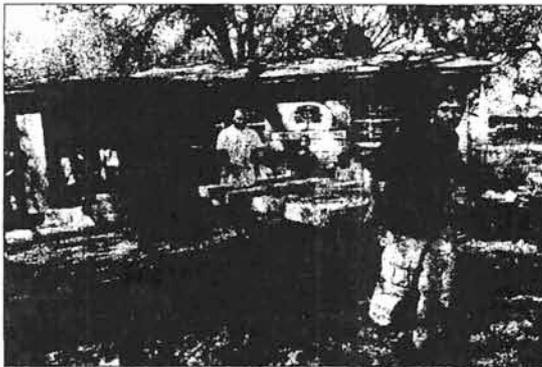


Students are building a community message center at the park. "You can come and leave a message," Ed Ross says, and "we'll get it out into the community and talk about it."

Yvenel Casseide, 15, worked on a sketch for a Blake High School art auction. Lakeema Matthew, 18, talked about selling T-shirts imprinted with photos she took of her neighborhood.

In another room, work was under way to set up a darkroom with donated equipment

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The house sits across from a park where volunteers move tables to allow students to do projects outdoors. The group has been cited for illegally operating from a single-family residence.

Cont...

STEPPING STONES

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from the University of South Florida.

In nearly five years, Community Stepping Stones has come a long way in reaching out to children in one of Tampa's poorest neighborhoods. But the modest house, 1908 E. Mulberry Drive, that teemed with activity Feb. 16 is a sign of the program's success and suddenly an unexpected hurdle for its future.

"We obviously don't have a space for everyone in there," said Ross, a former USF adjunct art professor.

But the more immediate problem is with zoning. Last year, code enforcement, based on a neighbor's complaint, cited the organization for illegally operating from a single-family residence.

"It's not looking good that we can keep the art house for what we use it for," Ross said.

He said zoning officials recommended applying for planned-development zoning and asking for waivers on parking and buffering. Code enforcement plans a reinspection, after which the case could be referred to a hearing master.

"Rezoning is what they need," zoning administrator Gloria Moreda said. "We're willing to work with [Ross] to get this through the process. It seems like a very worthwhile cause."

But rezoning costs money the organization doesn't have.

"It's a major problem for us," Ross said. "We're basically a volunteer organization."

He plans to speak with Moreda and also is scouting another Sulphur Springs location, possibly a church or other organization with space. Ideally, Stepping Stones would like to hold on to the Mulberry house and find other office and studio space.

The Arts Council of Hillsborough County and the USF School of Art and Art History will contribute about \$30,000 this year. Ross has applied to the Children's Board of Hillsborough County for matching funds.

The Children's Board is helping with advice on promoting and selling the students' art products, including T-shirts and ceramic plates.

Stepping Stones' twin goals

are to teach art and show how it leads to jobs.

"My thing is linking art to every subject," Ross said. "To me, art is everything in life."

Children sign contracts with Stepping Stones to keep up their school grades, stay out of trouble, attend art classes and volunteer for community service. In some cases, they can receive hourly stipends.

Ross said more than 60 percent of Sulphur Springs youngsters drop out of school.

"College is like another country to them," he said.

That's partly why Ross relies on USF students to help teach art. The college students earn credit for their service and Stepping Stones' students

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ED ROSS

Program leader, on the goals to connect art and employment

have role models, he said.

"They always have something to say," USF student Dusty Laurent, 26, said. "It's very intriguing."

Children "come out at 8 a.m. trying to get us to open up," said USF student Ian Humble, 24.

Matthew is the first Stepping Stones student to finish high school and go to college. Her honor roll grades for the fall

semester at Hillsborough Community College are posted on a wall near the T-shirts she designed.

She and Casseide were among several students who painted two murals at Rowlett Park as part of the city's public art program. Exhibits of Stepping Stones work were held last year at USF and HCC.

Casseide began coming to Stepping Stones about four years ago. Last weekend, he worked on a sketch for a painting blending flames of passion, the heart and the Bible.

His face, with a watch for an eye patch, is screen printed on a T-shirt with the message, Our Time Is Now.

"Why not put a watch on my

face?" he said. "Change the way people look at time."

Students are working on a Sulphur Springs community art project, building a "message center" at the park.

"You can come and leave a message," Ross said. "We'll get it out into the community and talk about it."

For now, the message center sits unpainted at the park. A neighborhood parade is planned to spread the word about the project.

"I like cleaning up a neighborhood and transforming it," Ross said.

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