

ST. LOUIS POST-DISPATCH

SMALL PRIVATE SCHOOL HAS ARTIST-IN-RESIDENCE

By David Hunn
12/13/2005

Leef Armontrout taught one of his first lessons Monday. He led five grade schoolers at The Soulard School down an alley in search of discarded treasure.

"In here! In here!" yelled Jackson Gibbs, 8, as he lifted a gray plastic lid on one of the garbage bins. His face soured. Nothing but boxes and newspapers in this one.

A second-grader inspected an old door; a 6-year-old fingered a skinny piece of wood; a kindergartner gazed at a long mirror stuffed behind a garbage bin.

Armontrout smiled. This was his specialty. Turning trash into art.

One of St. Louis' smallest private schools has hired Armontrout - a junk-collecting, torch-wielding sculptor - as its artist-in-residence. His goal: to teach the school's pupils - ranging from kindergarten through the third grade - how to think, create and solve problems like an artist.

The 14-student school will provide him a classroom studio and a cottage a few blocks down the road. In exchange, Armontrout will pave the way for what leaders hope will be years of residents to come.

Local art advocates say Armontrout could be the first true artist-in-residence at an area grade school, and one of just a handful across the country.

"This is a real opportunity for the kids to have a long-term relationship with an artist," said Shelly Hexter, executive director of Springboard to Learning, a community art organization that often works with schools. "I think it's very clever."

The Soulard School's plan comes at a time when many public and private schools have cut such activities because of budget shortfalls and an increasing emphasis on academics.

St. Louis art foundations and community agencies have tried to fill the gaps by sending artists to teach periodically in local classrooms. However, few grade schools have the budget, or the space, for a full-time artist.

The \$25,000-a-year St. Albans School in Washington has a writer-in-residence. Massachusetts' roughly \$26,000-a-year Phillips Academy Andover employs a resident painter at its adjoining museum.

These schools boast of curated galleries, best-selling novelists and artists on the rise.

The Soulard School, which costs a maximum of \$7,000 a year, doesn't have money to pay its artist, nor a well-defined plan for the year.

Instead, it offers Armontrout a residence, a studio at the school and something both teachers and Armontrout can only describe as community.

Mothers double as lunch cooks. Teachers take projects home with them. School director Kelly Holloran Bock includes her staff in decisions.

Armontrout's studio at 1110 Victor Street is now full.

Two-foot-tall Lego men sit in the windows. An empty fish pond is tucked under a table, a dress form behind the door. Bike tires, couches and dozens of bins of junk line the walls.

Armontrout's not sure exactly what he'll do with them.

A garden in the black asphalt lot out front would be nice, or a decorative fence to replace the chain links, he says. Maybe a colorful window over the front door.

"It's gonna be really interesting to see what comes out of here," he said.