

## Young 'Rocket Writers' look to the future of Memphis' Crosstown area

By Scott Carroll

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Through the windows of the Cleveland Street Flea Market, the empty Sears Crosstown Building begs a question for young writers in the Crosstown Arts Storybooth program.

"I love the idea of having kids sit here and ponder the question, 'What do you see?'" said Nat Akin, Crosstown Arts director of outreach and education. "What do they see as being the future for this neighborhood, for themselves, for what kinds of things are possible there?"

For several months in the fall, with Akin at their side, about a dozen students at Gordon Science and Arts Academy pecked away on Kerouac-era typewriters while facing the abandoned building from inside the flea market. But they were also looking past the Sears building. They were looking toward the stars.

The students recently published a collection of science-fiction short stories entitled "Tales of Modern Rocketry," which contains adventures of space exploration, war and interstellar travel. Akin, a former English teacher at Memphis University School and Lemoyne-Owen College, recruited local artists to illustrate and design the book, which includes a foreword by retired NASA astronaut Dr. Rhea Seddon.

Akin calls the kids, ages 10-18, the "Rocket Writers."

"It gave me a chance to learn about what I like to do, and how my life is," said Destiny Pinkins, a sixth-grader at Gordon Academy who penned "Girls Rock," a story featured in the book about an unexpected trip to a faraway planet. "And I like science, so I came up with some details and parts of the story on what I was going to do, then I ended up making up names."

The student-writers will take on fairy tales and modern myths in the spring session of the program. Storybooth also offers after-school homework help and a course in music production, and is expanding to accommodate students from across the Memphis area.

"Crosstown Arts is trying to resource as many artists as possible and give them venues for expression," Akin said. "We're just trying to do the same thing on the youth level and have them collaborate with working artists the idea is the projects for

spring lead to a finished product that is performed, exhibited or published before a receptive audience.”

Storybooth also offers a class in screen-printing for poster or T-shirt design that introduced students to Andy Warhol in its first spring session, according to 27-year-old artist Bonnie Khandpur, who teaches the course.

“We’re sort of approaching from the angle of a band art and merchandise class, and the different things you want to pursue in a career It’s so cool for kids to see how the process actually happens and do it themselves,” said Khandpur, a transplant from Austin, Texas, who has lived in Memphis about nine months.

Students in the screen-printing class will design a poster for the reopening of the Hi-Tone Café, among other works. The Hi-Tone is set to reopen in the coming months next door to the students’ workshops on Cleveland Street.

The program depends almost entirely on volunteers from the Memphis art community, according to Akin.

“It takes a certain level of commitment, because I know working artists who have their own job outside of their professional artistic work, and they may not have that capacity,” Akin said.

But a completed project between artists and students, Akin said, bears a great reward.

Pinkins shared his sentiment. Seeing her name and words in print, she said, was a thrill.

“I was amazed,” she said. “And I was just really excited.”



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