**DAVA’s work with the Alliance for Creative Youth Development and its Arts Evaluation Group**

***The Alliance for Creative Youth Development is a community of Colorado youth arts organizations that share evaluation methods and best practices. One of its leading member organizations, DAVA (Downtown Aurora Visual Arts), explains below the benefits of collaborating with fellow youth arts organizations to collect data and evaluate work in a way that shows the benefits of these programs on the youth they serve and also on the broader communities in which they work.***

**How does participating in the Alliance for Creative Youth Development’s Arts Evaluation Group help validate the outcomes of your work?**

It provides a story behind the measured outcomes we track. It helps us advance our advocacy work and our fundraising efforts; it helps us evaluate our program for the outcomes that matter most – for example, are the kids we work with growing and learning? Are staff members being responsive to their needs, and are we including their voice and perspective? And it absolutely helps us respond to funders’ requests for data and examples of our impact.

**What outcomes have been statistically solidified by your participation in the Arts Evaluation Group studies?**

A few examples:

* Collective impact is solidified by our participation in the Alliance.
* Our work manifests our firm commitment to working with youth from a different perspective, with youth as part of decision-making processes in terms of developing projects, themes, and approaches.
* Youth engaged in creative youth development programs are more likely to be engaged in their communities.

**How does this support your organizational efforts?**

For all the work we have done on evaluation, it’s been worth it. Funders brighten up at the statistics we bring! Board members smile. Data is a tricky subject in the arts – there is a stigma around it. But the benefits are that we’ve stayed together as a group, funders take us more seriously, and creative youth development outcomes are measurable outcomes related to marketing, advocacy, sustainability.

As a creative youth development organization, we are interested equally in excellence in the arts and youth development. Our survey outcomes reflect growth in both areas. If it were only art skills or only youth development, then that would be a lopsided approach to the work we do.

**In which area(s) have you seen the most significant statistical change year-over-year in your survey?**

DAVA’s Job Training in the Arts program is based on best practices for out-of-school arts programming and positive youth development, so our surveys reflect very stable, consistent outcomes. Early on in our evaluation process for YouthReach, we were challenged to think about Youth as Resources within our program quality domain. We learned that we had to be very vocal and obvious about how we were including youth in our project and curriculum development, including formalizing a Youth Advisory Committee. This process impacted the kids’ understanding of their involvement, which is reflected in the surveys.

If any of the domains take a dip, we implement strategies to improve. Really, the survey is valuable as a guide for best practices and “what you should be doing.” Then it’s a matter of figuring out how your specific population of kids responds to the issues, and training staff to adjust their approach to match.

**Which specific youth outcomes have been most important to your organization?**

Internally, we look at the Program Quality outcomes to make sure we are tracking well with kids. If numbers shift slightly, we can discuss strategies to reinforce or improve outcomes. In grants, we consistently use the following outcomes:

* % of youth that have “learned new artistic skills” and “learned about new things at DAVA.”
* % of youth that report that coming to this program has “helped me to learn in new ways,” and “learn I can do things I didn’t think I could do before.”
* % of youth that “work better with others on a team”
* % of youth that “feel better about myself” and “feel better about my future.”
* % of youth that feel “prepared to work at a job.”
* % of youth that “have more respect for young people of other cultures, races or ethnic groups.”

**What are common themes in your feedback from the youth?**

* **“**I learn so many new things at DAVA.”
* **“**It’s a different way of learning than at school. Teachers treat you differently at DAVA.”
* **“**I feel safe at DAVA.”
* **“**Create more DAVAs in other communities and nationwide.”

**What about feedback from parents?**

DAVA is a known and trusted presence in our community. Parents see their kids thriving here, even when they might have difficulty in school. The mom of one of our young people (12 years old) shared, “I was involved in the arts in Mexico and it brought me friends and confidence. I am so happy we found DAVA, because I have watched my daughter grow the same way here.”

**From your community?**

DAVA does amazing work in this community and reflects a sensitive ear to youth and issues facing youth. DAVA is a safe creative space and provides a welcoming productive presence in northern Aurora. Kids at DAVA are part of a new creative workforce in Aurora.

**What “voice for youth” does the Alliance for Creative Youth Development (and its Arts Evaluation Group) provide?**

There are many “voices” across disciplines, and we capture that collective voice. Voice for youth as ACYD means ***access*** -- access to the playing field for undeserved or marginalized youth. We believe there is a vast untapped pool of potential in our communities. We want be part of the “on ramp” for kids.

**Information about DAVA**

**How many youth do you serve on an annual basis?**

DAVA serves 1,000 kids (ages 3-17, unduplicated count) in year-round, on-site programs with over 10,000 visits. In Job Training in the Arts (our program evaluated within the Alliance), we typically serve 100 youth (unduplicated count) during 3,000 visits.

**What do you want the public to know about the importance of youth development through the arts?**

Creativity, invention, and innovation appear repeatedly in education standards and priorities for building a strong 21st Century workforce, yet the arts have been systematically stripped from schools in favor of teaching to high-stakes tests. One place kids can still practice the creative process is in a high quality after-school program that focuses on creative youth development. Such programs not only focus on mastering an art form; youth also develop personal, social, and intellectual skills that are critical to success in school, work, and life. Creative youth development intentionally provides this support and gives kids a chance to explore issues that are relevant and meaningful to them. Creativity connects you to the greater human experience and gives you a way to imagine new possibilities.

**What changes in youth -- behavior, attitudes, and knowledge -- have been most prevalent with participation in your organization?**

* Pride in self-expression and personal identity (includes an appreciation for diversity and intercultural understanding/learning)
* Increase in teamwork skills – respect, listening, valuing diverse perspectives, goal setting, working together.
* Feeling safe and supported – “DAVA is like home to me.” Sense of belonging, friendship, caring adult staff.
* Community Development – students are more connected to issues in our community and have learned to imagine creative solutions as well as the tools to create positive change.

**Is there any particular youth success story you are most proud of?**

There are two: first, Cruz Javier Torres is a staff member for DACA, Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals. His dedicated work to be a part of solutions for our new immigrant community is a source of pride to all of us. His dreams and goals were nurtured at DAVA, and he is a model for so many seeking a better future.

Julian Wakefield began in DAVA’s Computer Art Lab at age 12. He was then selected to be Junior Staff, working as a special assistant in our programs through high school. Julian will quickly testify that after-school programs kept him off the streets and out of trouble during peak youth crime hours. What began as a choice to do something fun after school led to a 10 year relationship with DAVA and staff mentors that literally changed the trajectory of Julian’s life. A graduate of Aurora’s Central High and recipient of the 2007 DAVA Scholarship for Excellence, he recently graduated with a degree in graphic design from the University of Colorado Denver. In his award acceptance speech, he spoke of the importance of having access to a place like DAVA, “this involves me, and you, and everyone…I had a choice to wander or a choice to expand and create personally and for others.” Julian continues to volunteer helping kids in DAVA’s OASIS Open Studio and Job Training programs.

**How many DAVA students have “paid it forward” or come back to the group to volunteer – giving back to the program that helped them so much?**

Job Training alumna Ysolina is a great example: she overcame a number of life challenges and is now finishing her BA to become a teacher. She reflected, “DAVA was my safe house. It was the one place where there was freedom to let my imagination grow, and I could develop my own thinking.”

Ysolina is one of many graduates who have come back to volunteer at DAVA. Their success points to the resilience of young people who, against all odds, are holding down jobs, going to college, starting families, and introducing stability into our community.

**A note from Susan Jenson, the executive director of DAVA:**

There have been many personal “aha moments” for me during my tenure at DAVA. I believe that we not only we promote excellence in the arts, but equally as important, excellence as individuals. That kids have a family home, a school home, and a home at DAVA.

Kids are endlessly creative. They will open their hearts and brains, hands and voices to any project. The more challenging the better! If you set high standards, kids will reach them.

Kids need positive references in adults, “access to caring adults.” We all do. People who smile and are encouraging. Who *actively* listen, listen, listen, listen, listen.

Creativity is directly linked to a safe, welcoming atmosphere. Period.

Reciprocity is a rule of the trade. It goes along with respect. So, if I respect what you have to say, I fully engage in taking your ideas into account, not just pretending to do so.

The arts open a pathway for engagement. Young people are not necessarily here to become “artists.” What we want is for them to have the same opportunities to succeed in whatever field they decide. The arts impact every layer of potential success.

Once kids have “it,” that developed creative sensibility, you can never take it away.

I think what we are talking about is an enhanced cultural democracy with equal access to all who choose to participate. We are also addressing a growing opportunity chasm, where kids are disconnected, isolated. In creative youth development, suddenly you see kids responding and seeing the value in their “voice.”

From staff: “we,” not “I,” is the operating standard. Learning alongside and with kids. It’s liberating. *Autonomy.* At some point you have to train and be willing to invest in trust. That said, there’s a lot of personal responsibility here in terms of getting it done.

What the arts offer is the ability to solve problems through challenges and obstacles to improve a work of art or performance. Failure, in that sense, is not the end. It is constructive, open to endless possibilities. You learn to take positive risks in your work and build resilience. Move the creative impulse along the track so that it offers the potential for new or previously undiscovered outcomes. And that’s success!