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## Leap of Faith

An afterschool program repairs a community in the Bronx.

By Stephanie Barnhart

LeAp's R.A.V.E. Center, one of six afterschool programs run by Learning through an Expanded Arts Program, Inc. (LeAp), received the 2010 MetLife Afterschool Innovator Award on October 21, 2010, in honor of Lights on Afterschool. This award is given to only six afterschool programs nationwide that are providing a safe haven for children and positively impacting their communities.

LeAp's R.A.V.E. Center, an acronym for Radical Arts Venue and Education, is located at Jordan L. Mott School CIS 22 in the Bronx. It serves economically disadvantaged and culturally under-served middle school students in the Morrisania community by providing valuable arts-based afterschool instruction. This high-quality program uses all art forms, including visual arts, music, dance, theater and writing, to engage students in creative pursuits, academic learning, violence prevention and community service. The innovative initiative aligns with the school-day curriculum. It fosters academic success, creative development, in-school attendance and student performance on standardized tests, while making a lasting and positive impact in the local community.

In 2005, LeAp executive director Ila Lane Gross approached Jim Pugliese to design and implement an afterschool program in one of New York City's most violent neighborhoods. The program was created in response to Mayor Michael Bloomberg's out-of-school-time initiative to help improve failing afterschool programs. It was funded by the NYC Department of Youth and Community Development (DYCD).

In a neighborhood burdened with pervasive poverty, gang violence, crime and substance abuse, CIS 22 was ranked one of the 12 most violent and underachieving schools. The state threatened to close the school due to dramatically high rates of student suspension, under performance, low attendance rates and violence. An article in The New York Times described CIS 22 before LeAp's R.A.V.E. Center was founded: "On his first visit, in October 2004, [former] Principal Shimon Waronker found a police officer arresting a student and calling for backup to handle the swelling

crowd. Students roamed the hallways with abandon; in one class of 30, only five students had bothered to show up.”

LeAp’s unique afterschool program grew out of the founding idea that all students are capable of attaining success when provided with a safe, stimulating environment. With Jim Pugliese and Monique Jarvis at the helm, LeAp’s R.A.V.E. Center has been an integral part of the revitalization of CIS 22. Since LeAp’s R.A.V.E. Center began, student relations in the school have improved, violence has decreased and students have been growing personally, artistically and academically.

In 2010, every afternoon throughout the school year, including 20 school holidays, students were involved in academic support like tutoring and homework help, community service, sports, recreation and arts-based clubs. The program offered students a wide variety of arts and academic activities that integrated the program’s theme of community development through community service. Students also received a hot supper every evening.

Students have the opportunity to work alongside professional artists and educators and participate in afterschool clubs including fashion design, visual arts, publishing, Web design, video and animation, bookmaking, graffiti arts/hip hop culture, an online magazine, library arts/literature, violin, band, martial arts, dance, slam poetry, theater arts, chess, sports, community action club, Young Environmental Stewards (YES) Club and cooking.

LeAp’s R.A.V.E. Center promotes violence prevention and community service by implementing low student-teacher ratios (approximately one teacher to every six students), allowing students to receive the individualized support they need. In accordance with the program’s community service focus, students gain leadership skills by performing and speaking at community centers and interviewing neighborhood members about social issues. Students develop beneficial relationships by working closely with peers, high school mentors and adults, and perform throughout New York City to build self-confidence and communication skills.

CIS 22 is now run by Principal Linda Rosenbury, who agrees that LeAp’s impact on the school is evident. “LeAp enriches our community through the arts,” says Rosenbury. “Students who were reluctant in math and literacy are learning skills through hip hop and band. The connection between staff and students is admirable, and we also employ graduates of the program as mentors. This makes a huge impact and fosters camaraderie in the community, which is desperately needed.”

Because of the R.A.V.E. Center’s success, hallways now burst with student exhibitions on bulletin boards, and monthly “Coffee House” performances take place in the school performance space. At these beloved monthly events, students perform poetry slams, dances and violin and band concerts. They read their creative writing, which has been published in student books. They present art exhibitions and showcase their photography and video art.

LeAp’s R.A.V.E. Center also received the 2007 New York Life award for the Bronx, and Jim Pugliese was awarded the prestigious 2008 PASE Setter Award.

For more information, visit [www.ravecenter.org](http://www.ravecenter.org) and [www.leapnyc.org](http://www.leapnyc.org).

*Stephanie Barnhart writes and edits articles specializing in education, the arts and the automotive industry. Her work has been featured in The New York Times and on [www.women-drivers.com](http://www.women-drivers.com). Barnhart’s previous career as a business development director and consultant (among others) in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, led her to improving education among economically disadvantaged children. She now resides in New York City.*

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