

DAREarts 'First Roots' Program — a Teacher's Story



I have been teaching in the First Nations community of Webequie, ON for the past three years. Throughout my time here, I am proud to say that some of my most memorable and authentic teaching experiences have been a direct result of the DAREarts program. I have been fortunate enough to work with DAREarts and witness, firsthand, the impact the program has on the students, school and community.

There are many challenges to education in remote communities like Webequie. As a teacher, it is immensely difficult to motivate the students and capture their interests. The DAREarts team of highly professional, motivated individuals consistently creates a supportive, safe, structured learning environment that fosters and nurtures student interests. As such, student motivation dramatically increases along with Teacher passion.

One student in particular stands out among the rest as one who has deeply benefited from DAREarts. Kaitlin was an older student who, like many of our students, struggles with school every day. Whether it was difficulties at home, peer pressure and drug abuse, or simply trying to fluently understand the English language, it was clear that Kaitlin was struggling. However, despite these challenges Kaitlin consistently voiced her willingness to complete High School.

I tried daily to reinforce Kaitlin's confidence by ensuring her that she can succeed if she just keeps pushing and stays focused. Over the years, I had seen improvement in Kaitlin's worth ethic and assignments. However, despite my best efforts to empower Kaitlin, over time my words seem to lose their substance.

Kaitlin began missing classes little by little. Then one day, Kaitlin approached me after school to inquire about a program she had heard from others in the community—DAREarts. Kaitlin is, first and foremost, an artist, passionate about music and art—painting in particular. I answered as many questions as I could and ended our conversation by

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instructing her to be in class next week when the DAREarts team would be present. As I spoke I could see excitement build in her eyes. The next week, she arrived to class on time.

The DAREarts team introduced themselves to the apprehensive group of students. Kaitlin sat in silence listening to every word the team had to share with her classmates about discipline, action, respect, responsibility, and the merits of education. The next day Kaitlin arrived on time again—a little more willing than the previous day. With each passing day Kaitlin's confidence in herself, her teacher, her community, and her peers grew. Kaitlin was finally speaking a language in school that was familiar to her. She was speaking a language that she was both passionate about and fluent in—a language that spoke to her heart and touched her spirit. Kaitlin was speaking the language of art.

The DAREarts team spoke to Kaitlin and the other students with such passion and respect. Everyone present in the room felt at ease and invited to enter into the artistic experience that was unfolding. In the weeks following, I personally witnessed Kaitlin's engagement, self-discipline, sense of responsibility and respect grow. Kaitlin along with many of her classmates not only attended regular daily classes again but also began making requests to work through the evenings on the DAREarts projects. I gladly and proudly made my classroom available to them.

The necessity for the DAREarts First Roots program became clear to me after I spent several hours assisting Kaitlin in the completion of her canvas painting. I had worked with her for several weeks on the painting, providing as much guidance and support as she wanted. She made one final brush stroke then called me over for my assessment of her work. "What do you think?" She asked. I stood over the canvass in silence for several moments, then responded by asking her one question, "Kaitlin, what do you think of your painting?" She immediately smiled and said three words that will forever stay with me. "I am proud", she said. "Me too", I replied.

The necessity of the DAREarts First Roots program becomes evident to me when I witness firsthand such improvement and passion in students that are otherwise detached and disconnected from their school community. The DAREarts First Roots program speaks to the students—reaching out to them—in a language that the youth is fluent in. Moreover, the program provides students with tools and skills necessary to successfully communicate, cooperate and collaborate in a goal driven world. I strongly believe that the success of DAREarts resides with the supportive, peaceful, encouraging approach Marilyn Field and her team has with implementing the program. Furthermore, DAREarts provides critical support to the teaching staff who are often exhausted and running low on ideas for curriculum implementation. I have come to realize that the students here in Webequie—as in many remote communities—feel isolated and without hope at times. The DAREarts holistic approach to education and the arts encourages and empowers both the students and the teachers. From the bottom of my heart I wish the program future success and would be deeply honoured to work with Marilyn and her team again.

Sincerely,



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