

SPARC LIVE ART: view from the eyes of VCU SL Music Interns

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*LIVE ART is a powerful, inclusive fine arts education program for students with varying abilities; a branch of the non-profit organization, SPARC (School of the Performing Arts in the Richmond Community). Students, ranging in ages 8 to 22, enroll in this fine arts program and engage in one (or more) of the eight weekly Live Art classes offered each year. VCU interns from the ASPiRE and VCU Music Education programs contribute as teaching assistants, lead class exercises and/or lessons, work one-on-one with individual students, and serve as community role models for the students. The VCU interns are volunteers in their assigned Service Learning classes bringing their skills, resources, and ideas to life in the classroom. The student population consists roughly of half typically developing children, and half children who have special needs. All classes are unified by the foundational ACE curriculum (acceptance, compassion, and empathy), that is implemented in various activities to teach the students life values. The lessons help nurture the student's journey within an all-inclusive community in which each unique student is celebrated.*

Imagine a life full of all-encompassing love that radiates from one heart to another, purely connecting all souls; a life where acceptance, compassion, and empathy are the centerpiece of every encounter. As humans, we long for this sort of genuine and emotional connection where people can simply be the truest form of themselves. From the moment we walked into our first LIVE ART class, it was apparent that this genuine love was real and it was present.

When we (Zack and Kirsten) jumped on the LIVE ART train in the Fall of 2014, we were welcomed into one of the instrumental classes entitled Soul Sound. The first day of class felt very much like the first day of kindergarten: no judgement, quick friendships, and lots of love. This was a pivotal moment in our education because for the first time, we were viewed as teachers rather than students. This new responsibility was a little nerve racking, yet very exciting. We were also new to the inclusive environment, the LIVE ART family, and the innovative fine arts curriculum. During our first class, we collectively created our very own class song led by staff member and musician, Josh Small. We later entitled the song: the Soul Sound Song.

*“S-O-U-L, S-O-U-N-D, it's a sound within our soul, time to set it free.”* This song showcased the very essence of creativity that LIVE ART embodies.



The foundation of the LIVE ART curriculum focuses on three concepts: acceptance, compassion and empathy, creating the acronym ACE. Each of the LIVE ART classes has multiple experiential activities that incorporate the meanings of these three words and include a reflection on our emotional responses. Early in our first semester of Soul Sound, we received a taste of the ACE curriculum from our fellow staff member Catie Huennekens as she led the “mirror activity” in order to express the importance of the first letter of ACE: Acceptance.

Ms. Huennekens began by asking the class to sit toward the mirrored wall in our classroom and asked what “acceptance” meant to us. One-by-one members of the class, ages ranging 8 to 22 years, shared their deep thoughts as to its meaning and the importance of acceptance in our personal lives. Then she asked the class to share who the most challenging people to accept in our lives were. After some students shared that their friends and family were the hardest people to accept, the focus began to shift toward the idea that sometimes the hardest person to accept is ourselves. We were asked to come to the mirror, look at ourselves, and think of personal things that we have a difficult time accepting. She asked the class to move our bodies (or put on sunglasses etc.) in order to view our personal struggles through a new perspective. As the class looked deep into the mirrors and around the room we saw the reflection of our own souls. We became aware that each and every one of us was looking in the mirror together. We realized that we are all on our own personal journey to accept our struggles and flaws: they are what make us unique. We all have special needs. It does not matter if we are diagnosed with a special need or not, we are all human beings that need each other to grow. After that class, we (Kirsten and Zack) understood what LIVE ART was about and how important our roles really were in this life changing program.

Soon, we began building strong bonds with students and staff, understanding the essence of LIVE ART. We quickly learned from our Soul Sound teachers how to guide conversations about heavy topics in a way that was encouraging and productive, while simultaneously including every person's contributions. Each class was filled with different experiences, but still focused on implementing and reflecting on the core values exemplified through ACE. In our Soul Sound class, we learned sequentially by singing and dancing to various songs, accompanying our singing with barred instruments (like Xylophone and Glockenspiel), and finally by singing and playing on ukuleles. This progression was ingenious, because it met every student on every developmental level so that each person could experience the music without feeling excluded.

A decisive moment in my (Kirsten's) LIVE ART experience was when I partnered with a student with Down Syndrome to play the xylophone. At first, the musician in me was frustrated because I had this unfair expectation that after just a few run-throughs, I could teach him how to play one of the show songs perfectly. Then I realized something that changed my perspective on education forever: LIVE ART isn't about perfection, it's about growth. What separates LIVE ART from other fine arts programs is that the focus isn't just on the growth of the inner artist, musician, dancer, or actor; the focus is on growing as people and learning how to come together. The ACE curriculum wasn't just something to rehearse in class but something that we could take outside of class and into our lives. Acceptance, compassion, and empathy are centerpieces to my music education career and they have been strong proponents to my growth.

As weeks passed by, our self-confidence grew, and we (K and Z) were given great opportunities to lead warm-ups, cool-downs, and eventually a music lesson together. This was truly a pivotal moment in our lives because it was the first time we implemented what we learned from our studies at VCU Music into a real-life setting. We met up in the lobby of the W. E. Singleton Center of the Performing Arts and discussed the creative routes we could take for this music lesson. We decided to use Israel Kamakawiwo'ole's arrangement of “Somewhere Over the Rainbow” with the chords that we were learning in Soul Sound. As we worked on the lesson

plan, we tried to keep things consistent and sequence the lesson in a way that the students were used to while still implementing our own unique methods. When we got to class and prepared for our lesson, we were exhilarated and nervous at the same time. Xylophones, glockenspiels, and ukuleles were set along the floors as we began our lesson. Our class had been using food phrases such as “nachos, guacamole on top” to teach rhythms of tricky strum patterns, and to our delight, the lesson was a success! Love and happiness filled the room as the beautiful music sang through our instruments and voices. When we finished class, we ended with a Hawaiian beach dance party and shook off our stress and celebrated the joy of the moment.

The joy of the moment became exhilaration and anxiousness as LIVE ART ran toward the finish line in May, LIVE ART: Soul - the performance. In each class, staff and students were making every effort to get prepared for the madness ahead; all LIVE ART classes would be combined together for the big show at the Altria Theatre. Classes had started in September, and while staff members worked diligently to develop core skills in students, the real focus was (and still is) building relationships and nurturing a safe environment for students to grow. Since LIVE ART students perform with international recording artists, music isn't always solidified until a few months before show time, meaning both students and staff had to be flexible. Although that sounds hectic, LIVE ART is all about being able to improvise and be creative in any situation. Some of us (most of us) were nervous, so our lead teacher, Christine Hoffman, told us “don't say the 'N' word; say SHMURVIS. When you are feeling “nervous,” say “shmurvis” and know that what we are really feeling is excitement and curiosity. Needless-to-say we were all “shmurvis” and ready to roll toward the big show!

In the blink of an eye, we found ourselves rehearsing at the Altria Theatre, running through songs such as “Brave” by Sara Bareilles with the artist herself (our class also performed songs with Jason Mraz, Robbie Shaffer and other artists). We spent a few days at the Collegiate School preparing with the entire cast of LIVE ART: Soul, excluding the artists. Although these rehearsals were long, we connected as a cast and watched what was happening in the other classes. These rehearsals really prepared us for the Altria. One thing we hadn't done was learn the finale to our show; when I say “we,” I mean the entire cast of LIVE ART: Soul. This is usually the case for each LIVE ART production as we have limited time as one group (all classes together) with the artists. Instead of freaking out or having a meltdown, we just had fun. The moment we freak out is the moment that everything falls apart. But what was there to freak out about? We had our family around us, helping each other every step of the way; there was no stopping the gears in motion.

As we (cast of Soul) chugged along the soul train that is LIVE ART, we also had our food breaks and extra activities to allow our brains and bodies the proper rest time they needed. Every year, one of the best days of LIVE ART is the day just before the performance when the students lead a Q & A session with the artists. Students share what LIVE ART means to them, and the impact it has on their lives. In turn, the artists share their stories and why LIVE ART's message is so important. The stories are always unique to the individual's experience, but the powerful impact remains the same. In moments like these, we connect and realize *we are all much more alike than different*. During LIVE ART: Soul, there was a distinct moment during the Q & A that put everything into perspective. One of the students diagnosed with special needs shared “All my life I have been told I am special. It wasn't until LIVE ART that I realized, I am

*special.*” In this moment, we saw all that hard work the staff and students put in was worth it, because we were not only changing the kids’ lives, but ourselves and our audience through the magic that is LIVE ART.

The day of the LIVE ART: Soul show was truly moving as we saw love pour out of the students to the audience, and vice versa. What makes this experience different from other shows with professional artists is the fact that teachers and staff are with the students on stage every step of the way. This is to show that our family is with each other, and not going to leave just because it is time to give a show; we don’t try to impress our audience, rather we try to touch their souls and welcome them into our all-inclusive environment. Our (K+Z) hearts raced as we neared the end of the LIVE ART show; memories of the whole year flashed before our eyes and we felt fortunate that we were really a part of something so pure and loving. Then it was all over. We hugged all the students we could and said our heart-filled goodbyes as we saw the faces of our new family depart from us.

LIVE ART: Soul was a success. After the first year, Zack and I were hooked on the positive experiences that we had with LIVE ART and were inspired to continue. We performed LIVE ART: Blue last year, and presently we are working on LIVE ART’s fifth anniversary performance: LIVE ART: Dream, which will take place on Sunday, June 11th 2017 at the Altria Theatre at 5:00 p.m. The overwhelming joy we feel from LIVE ART is difficult to convey because it is such a rare experience. LIVE ART is a place where children get to learn together in a setting that celebrates all abilities in a safe, loving environment including students of all abilities, races, and faiths in soul-growing classes. There is no other place where the first priority is to accept, have compassion, and empathize with one another and the second is to give a big show with professional and international artists. There is no other place quite like our home: LIVE ART.

