

Art fights stereotypes in Regent Park

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Pianist Cecilia NguyenTran, 20, knew as she got more and more involved in music, others were getting in with the wrong crowds. (Andrew Gunadie)

Whether staying on track in school while growing up in Regent Park, or dealing with a friend's murder, making music kept Steven Walters focused.

"I definitely had my frustrations and things that I needed to channel out, so music – songwriting, recording – definitely was all therapy for me. Still is," he said.

Now, at 26, he's the subject of one of five mini-documentaries released online this week as a prelude to next month's opening of the Regent Park Arts and Cultural Centre.

"Music definitely kept a lot of guys out of trouble," said Mr. Walters, who works in construction and pursues music on the side. Although his murdered friend wasn't from Regent Park, Mr. Walters knows people associate his community with violence and crime.

"I'm not saying it's the squeakiest, cleanest place," he said. "I've seen things and experienced things, but at the same time there's a lot of good."

The mini-docs are meant to fight the negative stereotype – and to highlight the role of the arts as a force for good.

“The image that often comes to mind when people think of Regent Park isn’t vibrant, young, talented people. There are a lot of other negative stereotypes that people have come to associate with Regent Park,” said Tim Jones, president and CEO of Artscape, the not-for-profit organization that will operate the new centre and commissioned the videos.

“Before we open the doors and let people in, we thought we’d start a conversation in the community about ‘What does Regent Park mean to you and what role does art play,’” he said. Artscape is asking people to respond using #regentparkarts on social media.

The 60,000-square-foot centre is part of the area’s revitalization, which also includes replacing more than 2,000 Toronto Community Housing units, adding thousands of condo spaces and introducing a park and community centre in one of the country’s oldest and largest social-housing communities.

Filmmaker Andrew Gunadie, hired to produce the videos, arrived in Toronto shortly after the June Eaton Centre shooting (which, police allege, involved a street gang based in Regent Park).

Mr. Gunadie said he quickly got to know the neighbourhood – and the misconceptions surrounding it.

“I felt like, in the end, it’s a community like a lot of others,” he said. “A thread that runs through my work is dealing with stereotypes and trying to turn those stereotypes on their head.”

Fathima-Husna Fahmy, a documentary subject, was part of a community art project that saw her beautifying benches and having an image of herself painted on the side of a building. Although it was her last year of high school, she said it helped her feel truly connected to her neighbourhood for the first time.

“The fact that I wear a Hijab, I’m a Muslim, it wasn’t really encouraged in my community to go out there and see yourself on a building. So I thought it was a unique risk to take,” she said.

“When I put myself out there, kids asked me questions about how I got involved.”

Now 22, Ms. Fahmy will be going to teacher’s college in the fall, and plans to complete her placement in Regent Park.

Pianist Cecilia NguyenTran, 20, knew as she got more and more involved in music, others were getting in with the wrong crowds.

As one of the first students at the Regent Park School of Music, which will have a home on the second floor of the new centre, Ms. NguyenTran spent her time outside of school in weekly lessons and practising piano.

She now works part-time at the music school and is hoping to continue her music education beyond her Royal Conservatory diploma.

“My parents pushed me into it ... so it was there for me from the start, so it was easy for me,” she said.

“But some kids have to find their own way into it.”

Along with the school of music, the arts and cultural centre will be home to the Collective of Black Artists, the Regent Park Film Festival, Native Earth Performing Arts, ArtHeart Community Art Centre, the Centre for Social Innovation, and the Regent Park Community Health Centre Pathways to Education Program.