



Students dance during a rehearsal at Creative Planet School of the Arts in Baldwin Park on Friday, June 1, 2012. The non-profit, private elementary school is celebrating its 10-year anniversary with a big awards gala, where they will present awards to honorees including Congresswoman Judy Chu on Sunday. (SGVN/Staff photo by Watchara Phomicinda)

Low-income Baldwin Park arts school celebrates 10-year anniversary

By Maritza Velazquez, SGVN

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BALDWIN PARK - Ten years ago, three people started a school aimed at integrating arts into academics for students whose parents may not have had the big bucks to send them to an expensive private school.

Creative Planet, a private, nonprofit school based in Baldwin Park, celebrated its 10-year anniversary Sunday with a special gala at the Ford Amphitheater in Hollywood.

It featured performances by the school's K-8 students.

"We're performing excerpts from shows over the last 10 years," Billy Rugh, Creative Planet artistic director, said Friday.

The performances have ties to various cultures, to historical events and to social issues such as AIDS and gay rights.

The school also honored several groups and individuals who have been influential at the 80-student school, including Rep. Judy Chu, singer Randi Driscoll and the Gay Men's Chorus of Los Angeles.

Creative Planet incorporates the arts, including music, dance and visual art, into everyday academics, Rugh said.

While the regular academic day runs until 2 p.m., the school focuses on the arts until 6 p.m. Many of the students there have single parents or a set of parents both working long hours, Rugh said.

"One of the big things is when they come in here they seem to have issues with self-esteem. As soon as that starts to rise, they seem to put more energy into their academics," Rugh said of Creative Planet's students.

Rugh and two of his colleagues, all from the entertainment industry, originally started the school at a site in El Monte with a mission to provide an arts program for low-income students.

"Because I grew up in El Monte, I really thought there was a lack of Latino kids with the opportunity to be involved in these programs," Rugh said.

However, the art school in 2002 was evicted from a church-owned property in El Monte after board members there thought that the curriculum, which included yoga and modern dance, was not following Christian principles.

But the school has grown since then and students say they are happy with their education.

On Friday they rehearsed for their big show on Sunday, while volunteers and teachers helped fit their costumes.

"It's different," 12-year-old Alexis Janelle Hernandez said of her school. "Most of the people here, we all have found our talents."

Hernandez's talent? Singing, dancing and acting.

Carina Lopez has attended the campus since she was a kindergartner and said she enjoys having arts injected into her academics.

"You need both to fill your life," she said. "It's helped me because now I have a dream to be a dancer or actor."

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