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Students at Ryman Arts are given free scholarships to cover the cost of instruction, field trips and art supplies.

Asian American Teens Paint A Better Future

Every year about 300 high school students throughout Southern California take part in Ryman Arts free courses.

By Nalea J. Ko, Reporter
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With each stroke of golden paint applied to his painting, Yi Zhong explains how he never thought his application to a Southern California art program would be accepted.

The 17-year-old Chinese American had doodled in a black sketchbook since the ninth grade, but Zhong says he was never enrolled in a professional art class outside of school. That changed about three years ago.

Encouraged by his art teacher at the Palisades Charter High School, Zhong applied for Ryman Arts, a free art program held at the University of Southern California.

To apply for the art courses Zhong submitted an essay, a teacher's recommendation and two still life drawings.

"I didn't really know much about it. But I figured it, I'd just try anyway," Zhong said about applying to Ryman Arts. "This is my third year here now. My third semester."

About 150 high schoolers like Zhong are enrolled in Ryman Arts this semester, which is 12 weeks long. There are about 10 different classes offered every Saturday, ranging from beginner to advanced courses.

To encourage more Los Angelenos to express themselves through drawing, Ryman Arts is sponsoring "Make Your Mark in the Park," on Oct. 17. The public event will be held at Exposition Park.

"We're going to have a huge scrolling paper that will wind its way through the entire park, like 2,000 feet or something," said Diane Brigham, executive director of Ryman Arts. "We're going to have our students leading the way and sort of encouraging people to draw what's going on."

In an effort to foster a love of art at Ryman Arts, students are given free scholarships to cover the cost of instruction, field trips and art supplies.

This semester students have come from over 100 different communities, Brigham says. Asian Americans make up the majority of the students. About 80 percent come from low-income areas. All come to hone their artistic talents.

But instructors and staff at Ryman Arts say the program focuses on more than just developing teenagers' artistic abilities.

"This is not just a course, but it's a way to apply for college," said art instructor Chuck Huang about the program's college and career planning components.

Students agree, saying the art program is an opportunity to experience college level courses.

"I've been to different, not just one, but different kinds of places. The ones where you kind of pay and then you go learn," said 16-year-old Leslie Park as she wiped cookie crumbs from her mouth while on break from art class. "They just say, 'Think of something.' And if you don't think of something they just kind of go over and do it for you."

"I've had that experience with other art classes also," interjected 17-year-old Ashley Tallichet, who stood beside Park, munching on cookies.

Before strolling back to their figure drawing class taught by Huang, the two friends walked past a pile of art toolboxes and drawing boards left by other students who are also on snack break.

While enrolled in Ryman Arts the students build a cache of free art supplies.

"They have watercolors, they have acrylics, they have all kinds of graphite and charcoal, they have a drawing board," Brigham explained pointing to a student's stockpile of art supplies. "It's really expensive. And a lot of the kids say that then they continue to use it."

The free art supplies are something the students say they do not take for granted.

"They give us, like, all the supplies. Even when we're done using them for that semester then I keep using them over again," said 15-year-old Yoo Jung, returning to her figure drawing class with a live nude model.

A classroom full of teenagers in a live drawing class with a nude model can be an awkward experience at first. But eventually, staff says, the teens learn to focus on their art techniques.

working on their observational skills.

"There's usually a few giggles in the beginning and then everybody is so frantic about drawing," Brigham explained about the students' first experience in their figure drawing class. "So you quickly just get focused on the art." Brigham added that the parents are told during orientation about the art models.

With a model posed in front of the class, Zhong and his classmates were steeped in concentration in their life drawing class as they finished their acrylic figure paintings.

In addition to building their art techniques and stash of art supplies, students also develop their art portfolios. College recruiters are invited to the campus to review Ryman Arts students' portfolios.

Over 94 percent of the art students pursue higher education, according to a study conducted by Ryman Arts.

"So we have colleges, especially art schools, come from all over the country because we have such good scouting grounds," said Rebecca Tuynman, Ryman Arts education manager.

The rapid pace of the art classes, students say, helps them build a substantial portfolio for college recruiters.

"The place I've been to is kind of pricey," Park said about other art courses she has attended. "The amount of work I produced from there compared to here is like so different. I would produce like one in a couple of months. Here it's like [snapping her fingers] each week."

A senior in high school, Park says the Ryman Arts program has opened her eyes to a career in the arts.

"Before I wanted to be a scientist until I went to AP chem and kind of found out that it wasn't my thing," Park said breaking into a laugh. "I've been doing art since I was little. But I never really took it as something serious. It was just more for fun."

A fieldtrip with Ryman Arts to an animation studio piqued Park's interest in pursuing a career as an animator.

Now Park hopes to work at Disney or Pixar one day. Instructors and staff hope other students are inspired by the art courses too.

"After that I was thinking, 'I could actually make something out of this,'" Park said. "I want to do this. This is what I really want to do."

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