

Stephen Howell plays piano at the Youth Storefront, a Project M.O.R.E. extension. For their music production class, students put on a concert each week, including one featuring the band, Tattered Remains (below).



VAL CANEZ/Tucson Citizen

Way cool School



NORMAN JEAN GARGASZ/Tucson Citizen

• At the Youth Storefront, students learn by running a shop, producing concerts, making videos and sitting in on City Council meetings.

By EDDIE NORTH-HAGER
Citizen Staff Writer

Two years ago, Cortney James Russell was a troublemaker. He dabbled in drugs and alcohol. He didn't listen to his parents or teachers. He started falling behind in school.

Last week, while Russell was running around an old brick building, making sure it was ready for a Saturday night concert, you couldn't tell he was the same person.

A video crew was ready to film the band, which had been lined up by Russell. A sound engineer was at the soundboard, and the stage lights were manned. Two girls at the door were ready to collect \$3 apiece from the 80 teen-agers who would soon cram into the small hall - no drugs, alcohol or moshing allowed.

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gigs. The audience yelled for two encores.

Throughout the evening, Russell wandered around, making sure everything was running smoothly. He figured the evening's events would earn him an A in his music production class, putting him that much closer to high school graduation, which two years ago was not going to happen.

"I wasn't doing well in a normal school," said Russell, who transferred from Palo Verde High School to Project M.O.R.E., a Tucson Unified School District alternative school where children learn through non-traditional methods in a non-traditional setting.

"I was not that good with the curriculum," said Russell. "I just didn't do well reading out of books - textbooks, textbooks, textbooks."

In addition to more-traditional classes, Russell, 18, takes a music production class that involves lining up bands for the Youth Storefront, a downtown satellite of Project M.O.R.E., which stands for More Opportunities for Relevant Education.

Through the class, Russell is learning about marketing, business, advertising and budgets, in a field that truly interests him.

This isn't marketing by the numbers in a classroom for five hours a week; this is real life.

"I've learned a lot more here," Russell said, "and



VAL CAÑEZ/Tucson Citizen

Jeff Jandran (above) works on a video for his Project M.O.R.E. technology class. Teresa Eagle (right) uses a silk screen press to print leather drinking glass coasters as her sister, Natalie, watches. Funds from sales of the coasters will go to the Storefront.



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Storefront for students

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straightened myself up a lot more."

The Storefront, at 123 S. Arizona Ave., is open for Project M.O.R.E. students from 1 to 6 p.m. Monday through Friday. An old brick structure, it's about 90 feet square, with plywood floors, partially painted brick walls and a huge skylight. Ancient computers are used in one corner. In another stands the stage for the bands. A screen printing press takes up another area. In the middle of the room are a few tables and a dozen chairs. No one lectures here.

"We're not going to give you a textbook and say, 'Read these chapters,'" said Dave Chandler, who is M.O.R.E.'s business community specialist and spends most of his time at the Storefront. "We want to know what you are into and what you want to learn about. One girl loved angels. So we told her to do a study on the effect angels had on American history."

Here the doors are always open, and students, whether taking a class or not, are encouraged to hang out.

"It's kind of a backdoor way of learning," Chandler said. "This isn't school like you're used to. What do you hate about school? It's not the learning part."

Chandler and teacher Tom Anderson came up with the idea of opening a retail store operated by students. Students would make arts and crafts and sell them while learning about commerce.

With a few adjustments, the Youth Storefront opened 2½ years ago.

"It's still an experiment in progress," Chandler said.

To help pay the Storefront's rent, the students help sell advertising in a newspaper they run called Dateline Downtown, which has a circulation of about 10,000; make T-shirts, hold concerts, and sell videotapes of concerts to the bands that play at them.

The students also can take other classes, including government, in the Storefront's free-form environment. In the government class, they can attend City Council and county supervisor meetings and watch trials at federal and City Court - all within walking distance of the Storefront.

They also produce "Live from the Youth Storefront" on public access TV.

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"I failed really badly at Tucson High, and I was put into Project M.O.R.E.," said Jandran, a junior. "The first year I didn't like it. But then I found this place, and I like it now. This is a place where all walks of life collide. It's a lot more open. You don't have to sit at a desk and do work."

Teresa Eagle, 16, transferred to Project M.O.R.E. and eventually started making friends at the Storefront. After a few months, she signed up for the music production class.

"I really messed up my freshman year at Tucson High," Eagle said. "I needed to catch up. They give you the option to take a lot more classes than required to. That helped me. (The class load) is hard if you let it be, but if you're on track and focused, it really isn't that bad."

Russell has learned a few things that weren't in the curriculum, such as a sense of self-worth.

"Growing up, I had a pretty tough life, and I had low self-esteem," Russell said. "My peers here have become like family. They make you gain this self-esteem. They've given me self-confidence. Not only my peers, but there are teachers that are as close as the peers. They're all great people."

He'll graduate in a year and hopes to become an alternative education teacher and, somehow, involved in the Youth Storefront.

IF YOU GO

● **What:** Musical bands Toilet Bowl Suicide and Veering Ever Red in concert.

● **When:** 7:30 p.m. Saturday.

● **Where:** Youth Storefront, 123 S. Arizona Ave., just south of Broadway between Fifth and Sixth