

Can theater be a solution to youth delinquency? Children's Legacy Theatre in Anacostia says "Yes".



Director of Children's Legacy Theatre, Jackie Carter is surrounded by her students. Sept. 16, 2024, in Washington. D.C. (Ann Duan)

Thanks to Children's Legacy Theatre, the toughest teens east of the Anacostia River have picked up paintbrushes and let their gentle sides flourish while their shyest peers have picked up microphones and become confident performers.

C.L.T. has brought Ward 7 and 8 teens' stories to life in Washington, D.C. from the Anacostia Arts Center on Marion Barry Avenue. Over 100 students ages 14 to 18 work with C.L.T. to produce four to five original productions each year. Through after-school jobs subsidized by the

district's Office of Employment, participants oversee each play and film from start to finish. They direct, produce, and advertise everything they perform, learning skills like organization, carpentry, and communication, alongside acting and singing.

Novon Britt, 17, of Anacostia became a singer with C.L.T. four years ago. "When I got in here, I was really quiet. I didn't really talk to nobody. And that's when I started singing over here, and that's when I started catching up with everything," he said.

C.L.T. has transformed hundreds of lives like Novon's since the nonprofit started in 2016. Jackie V. Carter of Anacostia, C.L.T.'s director and founder, said the organization can transform the youth delinquency problem in the district's 7th and 8th Wards as well— that is, with increased funding.

Youth in Washington's 7th and 8th Wards made up 42% of juvenile arrests in the entire district from January to June this year, according to a Metropolitan Police Department report. While the Bowser administration has invested in heightened policing and surveillance and harsher punishments for youth involved in crime through emergency legislation, Carter and students involved with C.L.T. said the District should address teen violence by investing in nonprofits focused on the performing arts, like C.L.T., instead.

Nandi Poles, 15, of Ward 8, is a student in C.L.T.. "I feel like the police not really doing nothing, like, they be on the block... I feel like they not proactive. They come in after the fact, and I feel

like it (funding) would be better towards us because the more money we make, the more people want to work and stay off the streets and stop doing bad stuff,” she said.

In addition, Carter said programs like C.L.T. give students somewhere to be and something to do after school. “Instead of giving a property owner \$500,000 to install cameras, give me \$500,000. You won't have to install the cameras. We'll make sure the kids are somewhere safe, doing good things, being wonderful young people,” she said.

C.L.T.’s main focus is theater, but the job creates a community where students are supported by staff and peers who hold one another accountable to pursue academics as well.

“Children’s Legacy Theatre has a 100% (high school) graduation rate, and a lot of the kids that come to us are not in the pipeline to graduation,” Carter said.

However, keeping the program staffed and students engaged has always come at a price. C.L.T. received 100% of its funding from government contributions in the past, and while funding increased by almost 80% from \$265,306 in FY2022 to \$466,549 in FY2023, according to the organization’s most recent tax returns, these figures cannot cover all of the nonprofit’s costs.



Emergency legislation passed in Washington, D.C. earlier this year increased policing and surveillance around schools and designated Drug Free Zones like this one outside Thurgood Marshall Academy. Sept. 16, 2024, in Washington. D.C. (Ann Duan)

“Even though contributions were increasing... what happens is, we’re a small nonprofit, but we function like a large nonprofit... We should not serve probably more than 20 students a year.

We’re up at maybe around 100 students... so while we do make the accommodations to create the seats through continuous programming... We don’t have the funding to do it,” Carter said.

Financial barriers have posed challenges to staffing in particular. Carter said this struggle has involved personal sacrifices. “What happens sometimes is that I know I’ll need a light instructor, I know I need a stage management instructor, I know I need an acting coach, I know I need a

directing coach... Most times, I cut my own salary so that I can make sure that I have enough staff to provide for the children,” she said.

Carmen Mitzi Sinnott, 50, of Anacostia was a former acting coach at C.L.T.. She serves as the director of another theater organization, All Here Together Productions, but she said low pay for staff at C.L.T. made it difficult for her to continue working with them. “You can't dedicate yourself to being an artist because you can't afford to live,” she said.

However, Sinnott said the work C.L.T. did was transformative for students living in the 7th and 8th Wards where policing was bolstered. “Are we going to militarize? Are we going to build community? Which one, because they don't work particularly well together,” she said.

Similar to C.L.T.’s method, a Western Kentucky University program called Theatre in Diversion, taught high-risk teenagers in Bowling Green, Kentucky to put on their own plays. The program ran for six years, starting in 2012. While T.I.D. was discontinued due to a lack of funding in 2018, the university reported positive outcomes for the teens who participated.

70% of students in the program were not involved in structured after-school activities prior to joining T.I.D., but their theater experiences resulted in positive changes regarding self confidence, relationship with parents, teachers, and peers, according to WKU’s internal evaluations of the program.

T.I.D. 's former director, Carol Jordan, 52, of Bowling Green, Kentucky said the project saw positive change, though it was short-lived. "Funding arts education tends to pay for itself in the social benefits we see from it," she said.

Though T.I.D. never compiled comprehensive data on the program's outcomes due to the lack of funding, Jordan said the graduation rates, community involvement, and college enrollment of former participants spoke to the program's effectiveness.

Though finances were a shared struggle between C.L.T. and T.I.D., Carter said C.L.T. has continued to complete projects on schedule. "We have not skipped a beat, we have not in terms of putting productions up, putting them up on time... we just did our 10 Minute Play Festival at Matthew's Memorial Baptist Church, we did a play here last Saturday... we have two productions opening in December," she said.

She has explored community partnerships and grants from private foundations to keep the organization funded in the meantime. Through robust partnerships with the Anacostia Coordinating Council and Ward 8 Clergy, Carter said C.L.T. has worked to gain publicity and shine the spotlight on students' accomplishments through the nonprofit.

Students like Nandi Poles hope for just that. "My hopes for C.L.T. in the future is probably... to get more support, more people to notice us, more people to publish us... I would like to see more projects in the future, maybe a bigger budget to do stuff so, like, we could get better props, better costumes... like top tier stuff," she said.

Ultimately, the organization has remained dedicated to its students, not only offering an “alternative to teen violence” as Carter said, but also providing a safe space and a creative community.

“It’s something to do at the end of the day so you’re not lonely, so you can make new friends, even. I got so much experience from here, and all the art we do,” Teonna Bratcher, 15, of Anacostia said.