

CalArts's CAP Trains the Next Generation of Filmmakers and Animators in Underserved LA Communities

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With an eye on developing and encouraging a new generation of Oscar-winning animators, CalArts' (CAP) initiative offers arts and technology education to high-need youth in Los Angeles, offering a range of classes taught by CalArts faculty, alumni and students. *Variety* visited Susan Miller Dorsey High School's current animation class to explore how the arts keep these students in motion.

“On the first day of school, if I were to say, ‘Raise your hand if you want to be here or know what this is about,’ only two would raise their hands. Fast forward to where we are now in the semester and 80% are passionate about something,” said Dorsey’s Robyn Charles, Program Director/Career Technical Arts. “The medium income here is \$22,000, and that number is raised by the fact that we are at the bottom of Baldwin Hills, a really affluent African-American community. We have a lot of Title 1, high-risk students.”

Charles, who also teaches a video production class at Dorsey, added that the students had “never before seen anything but the end product.” Now, she continued, “We awaken them to something they never even knew existed– a career path that they didn’t know was an option.”

The first program of its kind in the U.S., CalArts established the award-winning CAP program in 1990 to link the institution to community-based organizations and public schools throughout L.A. County. Today, CAP is partnered with 46 schools and organizations, offers 172 classes, and teaches over 4,000 students (aged 6-18) per year. In addition to animation, the program provides instruction in creative writing, dance, film, music, photography and visual art through tuition-free in-school, after-school, and summer programs at community organizations and public schools like Dorsey. Many students, particularly those in underserved areas, lack access to the education needed to work in the city's signature industry or to qualify for vocational training programs or college-level film programs. CAP wants to help those students.

CAP classes for fall 2017 started mid-October. This school year, CalArts alumna Yasmin Joyner is teaching the new CAP animation class — part of the Dorsey Media Academy — sponsored by Tony Bennett and Susan Benedetto's Exploring the Arts foundation. The class, open to all students at the school, is also integrated in a workforce development partnership (WDP) between CalArts and Dorsey that aims to connect Dorsey students to college preparation and career opportunities in the creative economy. (All CAP classes implement career and college preparation methods.) This year, as a first step in establishing the WDP, CalArts and Dorsey launched the Summer Film Academy to provide 150 students with intensive instruction in both animation and live-action film. The academy will return next year with more lessons spanning creative, technical, entrepreneurial and marketing aspects of the industry.

Joyner's 20-week animation class was the next step. Joyner, who grew up in the neighborhood of Dorsey, has been teaching in CAP since she was a student in CalArts' character animation program. She went on to participate in CAP's training for Teaching Artists, funded by a grant from AmeriCorps. Now, she teaches animation at Dorsey, but her work extends beyond the classroom. "That's why we wanted to work with AmeriCorps. This program used to focus a lot on instruction, but we realized we needed a 360-degree approach to think about the trajectory of someone's development," said CAP managing director Nadine Rambeau. Her dedication to the initiative stems from a drive to give high-need students more lucrative and fulfilling opportunities — "not going to work at McDonald's."

"I've always had the intention of having half of my career be in education for children in art and film and animation, and half my own career," said Joyner. "I got to CalArts in 2004 and heard about CAP at orientation. It was exactly what I wanted. I got into the program during the second half of my first year at CalArts and started teaching around the community." She added that her current animation class would not be possible without the support of Rambeau and Charles.

Charles designed the classroom with couches and bean bags for optimal comfort and creativity. She also uses the space after school as a media hub for her film students. “Once that TV is hooked up, we’ll have our own personal film festivals in here,” Charles noted. She said that while it is only a temporary space for the student media center, it will soon house services for the school’s high population of foster youth. “We’ll have students go through a program to qualify to work in a union. We want to make sure that they have jobs, because aging out of foster care, you’re falling without a net.” Regarding students who utilize the space for media purposes, she insisted, “These kids are going through something and I know that they can bring out some amazing stories.”

Joyner, who usually plays music in class, said that the laid-back yet intensive environment has won over her students. “I ask them, ‘What kind of music do you like? Do you like to dance? Do you like to rap?’ Because I like to dance and I like to rap. Guess what you need to do to get better at rap? You need to read more. You need to write more. You need to watch more. You need to learn how to tell a story. I’m cool with them being into sports and music videos. I’ve danced in front of them a couple of times because I can articulate animation through dance. It’s the exact same thing. I find a way to relate whatever their interest is to animation. To me, life is animation. We’re just moving in frames. We animate ourselves. That’s what I tell them.”

One of the most rewarding moments for Joyner so far was when she saw a student, who had previously paid little attention in class, showing one of the others how to do something — “without me helping! I pointed to Ms. Charles and started dancing. An epiphany came into view for him. He just realized he was able to do something he’d never done before. He problem-solved and constructed it in a way that he was happy with it.”

Charles said she fights for a 15-student cap in specialized classes like this; most classes are capped at 33-42 students each. “We target kids who otherwise would not be engaged because they come from social, emotional, or economic challenges. Foster kids, at-risk youth— we want to pull those students in to help raise graduation rates. With CalArts, we are able to ensure personalized attention. We serve really well students who have IEPs (Individualized Education Program). My favorite experiences are getting students who have been written off, bringing them in, and having them excel.”

While it is great to be in L.A., these students don’t have much access to information about where to go or what experiences are available in the city. “More than teaching, Yasmin takes students on field trips and engages with them on a coaching level,” Rambeau said. Joyner also brings in volunteer guests from the industry to speak about on portfolios, internships, networking and more, and holds family engagement workshops after school so siblings and parents know what they are doing in class. “They need to be informed about how to support their child’s growth in this particular sector that may be opaque to them,” she

said. “If you’ve never had experience with it, you don’t know how to help.” Joyner added that access to animation technology is limited due to the high expense of computer programs.

Building a portfolio is especially essential for high school students. Prior to 2017, Rambaue said, “a lot of kids that wanted to apply to get into animation had nothing to submit. They just had a love. We want them to know that we see that they want to try and taking it to the next level. Now, for their applications, they’ll actually have content for their portfolios.” She said that 600 students applied for CAP summer programs; 300 applied to the summer academy. “Animation is our top program; 90 kids applied, but we only had 30 slots.” She noted that the application process is designed to teach students how to present themselves professionally. “But if someone doesn’t have a portfolio, they’re not quite ready.”

“We’re committed to a long-term partnership with the community. We’re trying to be a force in the community for actual change in education. The vision is to use the resources of a college and combine it with these high schools, middle schools, and hopefully elementary schools so we can create a pipeline for talent. In order for them to have options, you have to make it accessible,” she said. In this inclusive classroom, students with disabilities do the same work as students alongside them who don’t have disabilities. Joyner has taught students with various types of learning needs, and Rambeau said that all CAP teachers are trained in that way. “We’re not a school. We’re a community-based program. Everyone who wants to get into our after-school programs, for the most part, gets in and we work with them where they are.”

Senior Demonie Johnson, who was in Charles’s video production class last year, said that this is her first animation class. “We’ve never had anything like this at this school. Yas came into my Spanish class last year and told us a bit about the program: animation, dance, music — and I was always interested in that. I used to play the viola in orchestra,” said Johnson. “Animation sounded fun so I thought I’d try it out this year. It’s going well so far.” She added: “I really like Dorsey now because of this program. We’ve never been exposed to anything hands-on like this — really getting into the business. I like making something out of nothing.”

Alex Sanchez, another senior in Joyner’s class, loves working on films and creating music. He was sold on the opportunity to learn animation when he heard that Joyner, who he knew from the summer program, would be teaching. Sanchez expressed his appreciation for how interactive she is with the class. “She actually listens, unlike other teachers,” he said.

Dr. Sean Gaston, principal at Dorsey, emphasized the importance of arts education. “At a high school, it’s always about graduation, but it is our responsibility to find out what motivates students,” he said. “School is about academic achievement, but it’s not always necessarily a straight academic path.” Rambeau echoed that sentiment: “If you can tap into what’s intrinsically interesting to students, they’ll be more likely to follow that path. We take their ideas seriously and provide technology and resources and experts to help bring their

ideas to life. Students who have never created a piece of art have never had anyone say they'd take them seriously and put a computer behind it and give them space and time to explore it, plus guidance on how to make it better.”

Gaston said that he wanted to bring formal arts instruction to Dorsey so that students would have an opportunity to express themselves and grow their talents. “We’re close, but we’re far from the entertainment community. We’re logistically and distance-wise close, but other things happen beyond us or without us despite us being so close,” he said. “For us to have this type of recognition and connection, we are able to get the kids in this community opportunities to showcase their talents.”

A Saturday class, in which students are taken to CalArts, also began in October. This 20-week High School Animation Class at CalArts is taught by former CAP students-turned-CalArts students, one one of whom received a full scholarship in Experimental Animation. These teachers exemplify how CAP can change lives. Another branch of CAP, the 20-year-old Sony Pictures Media Arts Program (SPMAP), has been supported by an innovative partnership between CalArts, the City of Los Angeles Department of Cultural Affairs and Sony Pictures Entertainment. The 30-week program offers animation and arts classes for middle school students at five sites across L.A. County.

In fall 2018, CalArts will launch a full in-school film academy at Dorsey where students will learn the creative and technical aspects of filmmaking through two learning clusters: a five-unit above-the-line course cluster, led by instructors from CalArts, covering acting, directing, music composition, screenwriting and producing; and a five-unit below-the-line cluster, led by instructors from a community college partner, covering the technical aspects of filmmaking. In the first semester of the academy, students will study their chosen focus, and in the second semester they will work in teams to create original shorts and films. It marks a great leap forward along the quest to train Hollywood’s next generation of animators.

“At first, I was a little shaky because this is my first animation class,” said Sanchez, who hopes for a future in the film business. “But Yas broke it down step by step and now I can say I’m getting better and better at animation.” Ultimately, he plans to make a film about how he sees and hears things in his neighborhood. Today, Disney/Pixar’s “Coco,” directed by Lee Unkrich and CalArts alumnus Adrian Molina, is showing in movie theaters worldwide. Tomorrow, students like Sanchez and Johnson could originate an idea for the next great film — and CAP could give that student tools to tell their story.