

Artist moves from prison to the classroom



David Spencer/The State Journal-Register

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When Ron Kaszuk sees railroad cars splashed with graffiti, he sees it as a “blatant sign of disrespect.” He shakes his head in despair when talking of the drugs and crime often associated with the tagger lifestyle.

So why is Kaszuk teaching graffiti classes to kids?

“I just want to teach them to be free with their art. I want to help them to learn to express themselves and how to use color based on their emotions,” he said.

The first challenge in understanding graffiti as a form of expression is separating the art from the dilapidated structures on which they often appear. The second is to separate the hip-hop culture in which the art form is embraced from the thug lifestyle with which it is commonly associated.

Kaszuk believes graffiti can be a legitimate art form while retaining its street character. The seed of this belief had already begun to sprout when he was at one of the darkest points in his life.

“When I was sitting in jail around all of these hardened criminals who didn’t care and who were absolutely coming back, I said, ‘Man, I just don’t want this,’” he recalled, his voice cracking with emotion.

These days, the 32-year-old regularly attends church, has started a graphic art business in Springfield and works with young artists in space provided by a dance studio.

“I lived a bad life. I made horrible decisions. But God has changed my life,” he said.

Paying debts

Kaszuk grew up on Chicago’s South Side. He first discovered his love of art when his brothers’ friends would leave notebooks of graffiti-like sketches lying about, and he would try to sketch what he saw.

“I lived in a bad neighborhood. You couldn’t always go out, so what I would do is play LEGOS and draw,” he said.

As he got older, the influence of the neighborhood gangs took hold, and with it came the outlaw side of the art form. After drinking beer to stoke his courage, Kaszuk would head out at night with cans of spray paint.

Vandalism wasn’t his only vice. Kaszuk was also involved with dealing drugs. When that left him cash strapped, he and a friend started breaking into cars to steal the owners’ tollway change.

“We were doing hundreds of cars a night and filling up backpacks to the point that it would take two of us to carry,” he said.

Their crime spree in 2003 lasted seven days until they were arrested. According to the Daily Herald in Arlington Heights, Kaszuk was found guilty of burglary and sentenced to 90 days in jail. Kaszuk served his 90 days, but later broke the terms of his release when he refused to miss work to meet with his parole officer.

In 2006, a warrant was issued for Kaszuk’s arrest.

“I actually came to Springfield on the run. I didn’t come to Springfield to change my life; I came to Springfield, and my life was changed,” he said.

Kaszuk moved in with a friend here, but soon realized that he was heading down the same path as before. He began attending Alcoholics Anonymous, where a man told him about a transitional house for recovering substance abusers. He moved in.

“I didn’t have anything. I had clothes and a backpack. And I started living the right life. And when I did that, I knew I had a warrant and that’s when I turned myself in,” he said.

Kaszuk returned to DuPage County and was sentenced to another eight months. He served about six months in 2007 at the Vandalia Correctional Center about 85 miles southeast of Springfield before he was paroled Nov. 9, 2007.

After completing his sentence, Kaszuk returned to Springfield.

This time, he wasn't on the run. This time, he was on a mission.

Being open

Kaszuk began working odd jobs as a handyman to support himself. He also began attending the iWorship Center.

"Pastor (Eric) Hanson has been a huge influence on my life. 'Family,' a lot of people use that term loosely. These people are people who love me, who helped me through the hard times," he said of his fellow church members.

After Kaszuk painted a mural for the church titled "Modern Day Mary," a church member recommend him to Tracey Sims, a local dance teacher who was looking for someone to decorate her new studio. She recognized his talent immediately, not just as an artist, but as a teacher.

Bringing in an ex-convict to teach graffiti art to kids could be seen as a risky move, but Sims said she thought his talents would fit well with the hip-hop dance classes she offered. She also saw his ability to connect with people.

Kaszuk doesn't hide his past. He begins each session with a personal introduction that lays bare many of the things he's done. Sims said it's not unusual for parents to be teary-eyed by the time he has finished talking about his personal salvation.

Kristen Ferguson of Springfield has three young children taking classes with Kaszuk. She admitted to initial concerns and even did some investigation into his background. After attending the first few classes with her kids, she says she feels comfortable that they're in good hands.

"He's got a lot of enthusiasm for teaching children. My kids enjoy their time in exploring both their artistic sides and Christian expression," Ferguson said.

For those who fear that the streets of Springfield will be awash in graffiti once his young students graduate to adolescence, Kaszuk is going to great lengths to see that doesn't happen. He's had police officers talk to his students about the consequences of illegal graffiti, and he's made his own feelings known.

"I let them know very sternly that if I find their name anywhere it's not supposed to be that I will personally call the police," he said of the practice of taggers signing their works. "It won't be tolerated."

'The kids I'm targeting'

While Kaszuk has discovered a gift in teaching children, he still feels a greater calling.

For the most part, the kids he works with now are from good families and are already headed in the right direction. He eventually wants to set up a studio in St. Louis, where illegal graffiti is still a big problem.

“The kids who are climbing on water towers, who are really talented, those are the kids I’m targeting,” he said.

In addition to getting them to go straight, Kaszuk wants to show them that there’s a legitimate market for their talent, especially as a form of advertising.

Kaszuk started I.M.A. Graphics to offer his services to businesses and organizations. His work can be seen locally on the Ice Deli on Lawrence Avenue.

Kaszuk admits he isn’t perfect. He’s fathered five children, four of whom live in Chicago. He has little contact with his relatives, most of whom can’t, or won’t, believe he’s turned his life around.

But he says he’s determined to atone for his past transgressions by helping others overcome their own.

“One thing I really believe is that God will give you the things that you need, but you have to go after the things that you want,” he said.

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