



## HOW YOUTH ARE USING MUSIC TO CHANGE THEIR STORIES IN SAN FRANCISCO

When Marcus Martin first walked into Sunset Youth Services, he knew there was something different about the people there. Right away, it was like entering a family where everyone acted as though they not only knew him, but they also accepted him.

“It was like instant trust,” he says.

Sunset’s Upstar Records, a label run entirely by youth, shows that the trust is mutual. While any youth at Sunset can be a part of making music, the label hires 15 youth each year and often employs others through provisional placement. Through Upstar they get to film and edit videos, produce music, and creatively express themselves in other productive ways.

Martin, known professionally as Mar-B the Producer, used the skills he learned at Upstar to open his own studio. Working with the label gave him the skills he needed to move out of his old neighborhood and begin working in music.

“The idea behind it [Upstar] was to give kids an opportunity to learn different job skills by using something they felt really excited and passionate about,” says Dawn Stueckle, executive director of Sunset Youth Services.

Not only do young adults gain training

from industry professionals in recording, mixing, mastering, releasing, distributing, and promoting music and videos, but they also gain valuable experience developing their leadership skills.

Perhaps most importantly, though, they also gain an opportunity to change their stories by redefining how they see themselves. Youth from tough backgrounds begin to replace words like *thug* and *gangster* with *rapper*, *producer*, and *entrepreneur*.

### PROCESSING PAIN

Sunset Youth Services is a Nazarene Compassionate Ministry Center in the Sunset neighborhood of San Francisco (USA) that was founded by Dawn Stueckle, Ron Stueckle, and Delvin Mack in 1992. The center was birthed out of lunchtime dodgeball tournaments the three of them led at a neighborhood middle school, where they learned the importance of commitment to in-risk youth.

“What do I have to offer besides being a consistent person in a group that needs consistency?” Dawn Stueckle asks.

Sunset Youth Services exists to provide

by

**Callie Radke,**

**NCM Communications**



opportunities for youth who are in-risk—youth who are often already in the system through foster care, probation, or similar contexts. Through Upstar Records, the center gives students the opportunity to process their emotions with a microphone instead of a gun.

Stueckle says that staff and volunteers “need to earn the right to then say to kids, ‘if someone’s giving you a mic, is that the message you want to give?’ But you have to earn that right.”

Many of the staff at the center are artists who have seen deep significance in helping young people process pain and hardship. To allow students space to do so, the recording studio is not censored. However, while the studio allows creativity to flow, even when it’s raw, the youth know that they have to meet strict standards if they want to make a track. For example, they may not objectify women in any way, and while talking about the realities of violence is accepted, they may not glorify violence.

**FOCUSING ON THE FUTURE**

Mar-B and TraVaughn Hicks have both been involved with producing music through the

Upstar studio for several years. For both, a major part of Sunset is the feeling of family.

“I’ve never really been anywhere where I get to do all the stuff I want to and actually be happy every time I come through,” Hicks says. “Everyone here actually feels like we’re

**Upstar gives students the opportunity to process their emotions with a microphone instead of a gun.**

all a part of one big family, which I’ve always wanted to be a part of.”

In fact, for many youth, Sunset becomes a surrogate family where background becomes less important than future goals. This has been Mar-B’s experience since he started coming to

the center in 2007. Mar-B’s grandmother is the only member of his biological family he considers reliable. For him, the Stueckles and the rest of the Sunset team have become a new family.

“It can be any situation, and I can call Dawn and Ron, and they’ll help me out. There were times where I didn’t have clothes, and they paid for them so I could go to an interview and get a job,” he says.

Hicks has also found guidance through his work with Upstar. Prior to his employment there, Hicks was unsure of what he wanted to pursue after high school. Now, he knows he wants to produce music that tells a story. He wants to be known for making music that’s different from other kinds of music. He focuses on one idea, one theme, and then tells a cohesive story throughout his pieces.

“When I first came here I gained the music skills that I wanted. I gained more video editing skills, and I feel like I can actually do something with it. So it’s making me feel like I actually do want to push myself to go further and take a bigger step than what I’ve already done,” Hicks says.

Prior to his work with Upstar, Hicks

didn't have anywhere he could go to be creative. When he is at home, he says, it's harder to be inspired. At the studio, though, he and his friends are all working toward a common goal with the same passion, pushing each other to be more creative.

That creative environment has led to four full-length CDs and the chance for dozens of students to learn marketable skills and choose to create futures free from violence. It also provides a space for healing as well as a space for youth to find the trust and love they might lack at home. Mar-B says he and a close friend actually came from rival neighborhoods. They attended the same school but were never able to become friends prior to working at Upstar together.

"It took time for me to be like, 'I don't care what other people think,'" Mar-B says.

Mar-B has mainly isolated himself from his old life and neighborhood, but he is still friends with his old rival, even while many of their old neighbors are trying to kill each other.

### CREATING CONSISTENCY

According to Stueckle, it's important to allow students to experience consistency because they can learn that the staff is not going anywhere, unlike those in possibly volatile home situations. Stueckle even started putting photos in albums so that students could have family albums to show friends down the road. Often, people will ask if she thinks the model can be replicated in other cities.

"Yes, the model can be replicated," she says, "but what matters more than the model is the people and whether there are people in the mix who are going to spend their lives investing in a neighborhood or an area or a group. They're going to essentially decide, 'This is how I'm going to live out my days.'"

That is exactly what the Stueckles have done, and it's part of why the relationships they have developed work. They live in the same neighborhood, and they and the rest of the staff are willing to trust and accept young people regardless of their situation in life.

"The transformative power of unconditional love and grace will never cease to amaze me," Stueckle wrote on Sunset's blog. "It is so simple on paper really—love and forgive. In life it is a much more difficult undertaking, which is why it is rare. It turns out that youth really do blossom when they feel safe and loved. We see this every single day. It's not fast, but it is real." ■

## THE POWER OF PERCEPTION

Through its youth-run music label, Upstar Records, Sunset Youth Services in San Francisco works alongside urban youth to help them change the way they see themselves. Bryan Stevenson, author of *Just Mercy*, said in a 2012 TED Talk, "There is power in identity." He suggests that identity can actually determine the outcomes of a person's life.

Perceptions based on stereotypes have particularly affected young men of color. In the United States, 1 in every 15 black men and 1 in every 36 Latino men are incarcerated, compared with 1 in every 106 white men. In fact, 1 of every 3 young black men can expect to spend time behind bars at some point in his life.

By helping youth redefine themselves with words like *business owner* and *musician* instead of words like *thug*, Sunset is helping youth reject the idea that they will

inevitably end up in jail.

Every day, staff and volunteers show up to remind young people that they have value because they are made in God's image, and they don't have to let other people define who they are or who they will become.



**They also gain an opportunity to change their stories by redefining how they see themselves. The youth, who typically come from tough backgrounds, begin to replace words like *thug* and *gangster* with *rapper*, *producer*, and *entrepreneur*.**

**To listen to or purchase one of the records produced by Upstar, look them up on iTunes under the name UpStar Records. The latest album is titled *Rise*.**