

# Out of the Box



**N**estled in a stately house about a five-minute walk from Etterbeek's Montgomery Square, Out of the Box opened its doors to the public in September 2015. Founded by Diane Hennebert, former artistic director of the Boghossian Foundation, Out of the Box bills itself as an alternative pedagogical center, one aimed at disenfranchised teenagers whom the traditional educational system have left behind and, in certain instances, failed all together. A rather ambitious, some would even say utopic, endeavor, the non-profit acts as a counterweight to the prevailing thinking on how to educate our youth by offering a variety of workshops – comedy, nutrition, yoga, creative writing – that stretch the definition of learning as we know it. Here, the focus is on discovery, both of oneself and of others, in the hope of getting some sense of direction for the future. It's a story of hope, for the kids first and foremost, but also for our antiquated take on education.

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in the workshops they offer. It was nearly three years before its inauguration, while still director of the Boghossian Foundation, when Diane began conjuring the foundations for a pedagogical center inspired largely by the legendary Black Mountain College, a progressive college with a strong focus on the liberal arts in North Carolina. The first cycle debuted with 15 students, ranging from 15 to 20 years old, the last week of September 2015 after having received a substantial support from the Boghossian Foundation, the National Lottery, Thalie Art Foundation, the Region of Brussels, and a growing list of private sponsors including individuals such as Hans Ulrich Obrist, art critic and curator, who loaned part of his private library to Out of the Box.

## *We don't care about school, we care about education*

From her dimly lit office, Diane recalls the concerns, challenges and worries associated with new ventures. "When we began I was scared... it's not easy, you have to figure out the rules... and I am never scared," but the students evolved faster than she imagined. She witnessed a change in behaviour, in the interaction between the students and the level of engagement with the curriculum. First was gaining their trust she explains, "but by the second week we were already noting changes," citing her team's "enthusiasm, generosity, and a bit of magic" as key to this early success. "Diversity is a big part, each student adds to the group's diversity, both socially and culturally," and it is an important factor in the admission process along with a good level of French. "From day one they found solidarity with each other, perhaps because of their common denominator."

On any given day, the students, most of which are boys, arrive between nine and nine thirty in the morning and are welcomed by Sylvestre, the only education specialist employed as part of the full time staff of four. Before joining Out of the Box, he worked for SOS Jeune Quartier Libre, helping at risk youth facing hardships. The young and spirited educator's primary task is to act as a mediator between the staff and the students – intervening should personal problems hinder their academic progress. A place like Out of the Box is perhaps not the best option in all cases, and he admits feeling concerned for what the students will face upon leaving the program. "There are students that perhaps do not quite understand the purpose of what they are doing here, and we have to help them make sense of it,"



Perhaps it was the creeping dropout numbers in Brussels, at an estimated 28%, that prompted Diane Hennebert to create Out of The Box, an alternative pedagogical centre aimed at giving youth another crack at education, one outside of the traditional school system. The dropout rate, as a study done for the Bank Degroof Foundation indicates, is symptomatic of the failures of the established educational system, which Diane believes stems from "a societal problem and a problem with the schools, not only a problem of the youth." With Out of the Box, the aim is not only to keep youngsters off the streets, but to serve as a catalyst for self-awareness of their individual potential. Boasting a dynamic curriculum with creativity at the forefront, she hopes students come here and "find themselves, and what they want to do later. We don't care about school, we care about education," speaking of the unconventional teaching methods employed



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both during workshops and joint student-staff weekly meetings. For Sylvestre, the ultimate goal is that after nine months “they leave with a life project in mind, and that they succeeded in staying here for nine months... that they realize they can manage their lives, and know what they are capable of.” If everyone, or the grand majority, achieves this, “it’s battle won.” Together with Catherine, the program’s full time psychologist, Sylvestre facilitates the students’ success and re-entry to school giving them “tools to solve a given problem, or directing them to get specialized or qualified help when needed.”

Catherine specialised in sophrology, a healthcare philosophy and practice hinged on finding harmony in consciousness. She worked at one of the local psycho-medical social centres known as PMS before landing her dream job helping at risk youth at Out of the Box. She zealously talks of the success of the program, evinced by the student’s response, and full engagement in the workshops she helps facilitate. Ultimately, as she sums up her role and aims, “we try to develop their belief in free will through dialogue, but it takes time before each individual realises how to become an agent of his or her

own life.” Revolving around three main themes, the curriculum’s first months are dedicated to self-discovery. “Memory is very subjective,” Catherine says, and students are encouraged “to take their story and see recurrent conflicts, and to find passions,” be it via photography, humour, or creative writing. They also take nutrition, gardening, and yoga, and have optional courses in mathematics, English and French. A favourite among students is the hip-hop workshop given by artist Gregory Monfort, taking them through creating and eventually producing their own track. The second phase of the curriculum focuses on gaining awareness of their surrounding environment, followed by three months of “getting to know the world” and culminating in a final project in the form of a book and a film.

At the time of my visit the students worked with performer Sam Touzani on a project they call the Line of Life. Sam is a Brussels-based performer and at Out of the Box he encourages artistic expression: “we teach them to pretend to be another, to get to know themselves.” A few hours before meeting Sam, the students had to perform a song in front of others, and the results, personal and stirring, have not ceased to impress him. “There



is a lot of empathy, it resonates with the others, it is a pleasure to see the evolution," of the group at large and individual cases of students overcoming their insecurities to share very personal stories. Sam talks about Adel, a 15-year-old with a difficult background, who gradually and notably evolved: "we found he likes rap, and today he presented a piece of rap, which was amazing, and we were all touched, by his earnest and transformative stride." Sam's eyes light up as he talks of his strong belief in the program's aims, "if we can open a door, inside and outside, and if we manage to give them more consciousness, then we have won."

Later that day I sat down with Adel who confessed having struggled in previous schools. Constantly being reprimanded and growing weary of futile discipline, he was left with two options: attending the Services d'Accrochage Scolaire (SAS), a larger organisation and six-month program, or Out of the Box. He opted for the latter after a first visit, albeit not entirely sure of what awaited him. He did express feeling at ease having entered the program. As opposed to previous schools, where he often was found in the administrator's office, "they were not nice, I always had problems in the other schools," and where punishment came faster than solutions. He says he enjoys the dynamic program, some workshops more than others, and the freedom of being able to move about if necessary. Upon completing the year at Out of the Box he plans join CEFE, a center for education and part time job training.

Yet for Sarah, this freedom as a student can at times prove distracting "we have too much freedom, sometimes during the workshops students get up constantly and it can seem a lack of respect for the person giving the workshop," but realises not everyone feels the same way. She recalls, in a modest tone, attending several schools, including art school, where discouraging professors, and fast to judge students gave her reasons enough to seek an alternative. Out of the Box was a good match, a decision she does

not regret, "I have met really nice and interesting people, we are a small group and have more individual attention," from the attentive and readily available staff. For Sarah, Out of the Box became more than just an educational centre, "it's like a second home, I feel good being here, and we leave other problems out the door before coming in," and it also ushered in a new outlook on her future endeavors. As soon as she turns 22, she plans to travel and live temporarily in South Korea, "because I am shy, I want to challenge myself to other experiences, travel, meet new people, and new cultures and do things on my own," plus, she adds, it will nurture her love for K-pop and Korean culture in general.

After the various encounters with staff and students, a sense of enthusiasm and solidarity reverberated with everyone I spoke to. Out of the Box, as Diane and her team agree, remains a project-in-the-making steadfast on its creative and artistic focus conscious of student needs – who despite sometimes vaguely understanding the purpose of each workshop, remain optimistic, laying their trust and full commitment to a program that still needs some fine-tuning. Indeed, with just three months since its beginnings, it's still too early to make any judgment call. And, although students' progress thus far is promising, the team keeps its feet firmly to the ground, acknowledging that no two students will benefit equally: "the main goal here is getting the students from thinking in short term to thinking in long term, to enter in different time dimensions, and if we manage to succeed in that, then we have won the battle," Diane concludes. And what a battle it'll be. Taking on a centuries-old education system hell bent on more of the same – classrooms, desks, lectures and top-down teachings – it's no small feat. But Out of the Box seems to be heading in the right direction.

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