

Groups will split \$2 million

By Kristen A. Graham
INQUIRER STAFF WRITER

Soriya Thach has seen it firsthand. Because of \$2 million in grants from the John S. and James L. Knight Foundation, artists' worlds are changing in Camden.

Thach, an 18-year-old student at Brimm Medical Arts High in the city, was hired as a junior training artist by the Perkins Center for the Arts, which received \$452,000 over four years. She helped artist Cesar Viveros and students from Summer Elementary School finish a tall, stunning mural on the side of a building at Haddon Avenue and Market Street.

That she gets paid to paint is still a revelation to Thach, who also loved guiding young children in writing messages of change for Camden: "I want to walk down clean streets" and "Drugs Killing Stop!" Thach motioned attention to her group's Camden-



Tavaris Headen (right), 10, leads other students in a dance program funded by the Knight Foundation.

themed handiwork — a giant Walt Whitman face, laughing children, a Campbell's soup can — and smiled. The piece is called *In a Dream I Saw a City Invincible*, a nod to a Whitman poem.

"You get to see what the kids want to change about the city — how they want to fix things," she said, pointing to mosaic tiles in bright colors. "They want to stop violence. They want to fix potholes."

In all, the Knight Foundation awarded nearly \$5 million to 19 arts groups in Philadelphia and Camden late last year. The foundation is separate from Knight Ridder Inc., which owns Philadelphia Newspapers Inc., publisher of *The Inquirer* and the *Philadelphia Daily News*.

Alan Willoughby, executive director of the Moorestown-based Perkins Center for the Arts, said his group would use its award to support its
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Camden work — murals and artist training programs, scholarships for teenagers to attend summer classes, artist residency programs in schools, and an arts partnership with organizations working in Camden.

Another Perkins group that will benefit from the Knight money is an after-school program at Seventh Street and Ferry Avenue in South Camden where, on a recent afternoon, fourth grader Jabril Clark danced with abandon.

Perkins faculty member Candace Carriger led Jabril and 11 spirited classmates from Camp Peace through an hour of moves, warming up and ultimately creating a dance to Langston Hughes' poem "Dreams."

The wiggling third and fourth graders took big breaths and then bigger ones. They slid and fell and spun and twisted, tentatively at first, then joyously, clapping madly for one another.

"This is the first time I did dance stuff," Jabril said, his trying-to-be-cool shrug no mask for his enthusiasm. "I liked it."

Shy Brianna Rios had little to say about her first exposure to such work. But when it was time to lie on the floor and write in journals about the afternoon, her colored pencil flew across the page, writing and drawing.

"We did great!" she wrote, smiling to herself.



SARAH J. GLOVER / Inquirer Staff Photographer

Brianna Rios works on a journal entry while instructor Candace Carriger helps another student at Urban Promise at Seventh Street and Ferry Avenue in South Camden.

Dimirra Edwards, 18, a Perkins junior training artist who helps Carriger, appreciates how the arts change the children's world.

"At first, they were stubborn, and they didn't know what to make of it," Edwards said. "But now they're open. They love it. I love it."

Across the city, Pamela Bridgeforth of the Walt Whitman Arts Center has been plug-

ging away in Camden's arts community for 13 years.

But the \$439,000 that the Knight Foundation awarded her organization over three years was the largest award the center had ever received, and it has breathed new life into the group.

"I've never seen this much energy and vitality before," Bridgeforth said. "We're incredibly psyched, and this has really

energized me personally."

The money has allowed the Whitman Center to launch five neighborhood "storefront" projects, taking the arts directly into communities with more classes for children and adults and employing local artists.

Work has already begun. The first site, at Second and York Streets, is up and running, and plans for the others are well under way.