

Saturday, April 3, 2010

Do What You Love, Singer Says

■ *'Be an Artist' program excites middle-schoolers*

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When eighth-graders at Washington Middle School sat down in the library recently, they were nervous and uncertain about the man with the guitar sitting in front of them.

Then the man, Darden Smith of Austin, Texas, had them close their eyes and imagine waking up on a Saturday morning with the entire day ahead of them.

They smiled.

"What you do in your free time is what you love," said Smith, a songwriter

who travels the world bringing his "Be An Artist" program to schools.

The workshops also were given to South Valley Academy, Albuquerque High and Isleta Elementary, courtesy of New Mexico Voices for Children, the APS Education Foundation and other groups.

The classes wrote and performed songs using a laptop computer and a microphone, with backup by Smith's guitar. Smith made recordings on CDs and gave them to the schools after a lesson on how quickly the artistic process can unfold.

His message: He was doing what he loved to do, and students thinking of

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Singer-songwriter Darden Smith works with Washington Middle School eighth-graders during a "Be an Artist" appearance this week.

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things like playing soccer or video games or roller skating can also turn their interests into fulfilling careers.

"I cannot imagine not playing music," said the 48-year-old, whose first music lessons consisted of learning Neil Young songs on the guitar. "I've got to have music every day."

The songs the kids wrote were sometimes silly. For example, one class shouted out suggestions about "candy," which led to a catchy song about "Candy and Doughnuts" and going to "Doughnutland."

"It was awesome, but it was really random," 14-year-old Brenda Frayre said about her class' song, "Hip Hop Bingo."

While the students left laughing about their songs, it was the message of making individual choices based on their talents and interests that resonated for some of them later.

"Nothing stops us," said Erika Perea, 13, who likes to sing and dance but had never written a song before. "We can travel through the world, and we can make our own songs."

Smith said he's traveled through Western Europe

and the United States, at private and public schools, to get his message across.

The songwriter has composed music for the Austin Symphony and has written and produced a documentary for BBC Radio 2, where his song "After All This Time" was the No. 3 single in 2002. His debut album out of the Austin music scene in 1986 featured backup vocals by Lyle Lovett and Nanci Griffith. A 2007 album, "Ojo," features recordings from his shows in New Mexico.