

# From art therapy to the Oscars

## Matt D'Arrigo of A Reason to Survive discusses working with Inocente and other underprivileged local teens

By [Nina Garin \(/staff/nina-garin/\)](#) 5:30 p.m. Oct. 18, 2013



Matt D'Arrigo of A Reason to Survive — *K.C. Alfred*

Earlier this year, people all over the world found out about Matt D'Arrigo's arts organization, [A Reason to Survive](http://www.areasonetosurvive.org) (ARTS).

"Inocente," a film based on a local homeless ARTS participant, won an Academy Award for best documentary short.

But D'Arrigo, 41, didn't start the organization for the glitz and glamour. He wanted to give kids facing adversity a place to feel safe and he's been doing that since 2001.

ARTS recently moved into a new building in National City, where the program's been based for just over a year.

D'Arrigo, who came to San Diego from Boston in 1997, explains why he feels art can save lives.

### **Q: What is A Reason to Survive?**

**A:** ARTS is dedicated to changing the life trajectory of youth facing adversity through the arts and creativity. We offer therapeutic arts programs, formal arts education, and college/career preparation in the arts and creative industries. We're a one-stop shop bringing youth from crisis to college or career using the arts and creativity. Our mission is to provide, support, and advocate for arts programs that heal, inspire, and empower youth facing adversity.

### **Q: Why did you decide to found it?**

**A:** I came up with the whole idea when I was 19 years old facing my own difficulties. I was studying art in college when my mom and sister were both diagnosed with cancer. I took a year off and stayed home, but would escape to my bedroom everyday to paint and listen to music. It was extremely therapeutic and transformational for me and helped me through that very difficult time. I knew if it worked for me, it would work for other kids facing their own challenges.

### **Q: ARTS recently got a lot of attention thanks to the Oscar-winning short documentary "[Inocente](http://inocentedoc.com/)." How does her story reflect the organization?**

**A:** Inocente's story is the story of ARTS and exemplifies why we exist. She is the exact reason why I started the organization. Inocente was homeless, abused and bullied, but a true artist was inside waiting to get out. She relied on art as a coping mechanism and a vehicle to turn her life around. She's one of our many success stories.

### **Q: Has the success of the documentary helped ARTS?**

**A:** It has helped in a number of areas. First, it's validated our program in a very real way. Second, it has given us national recognition, awareness and a platform to advocate about the importance of the arts and arts education for youth. We are taking a leadership role in creating a movement around the importance of arts education and youth arts programming. It has also opened doors and allowed us to build relationships that will help strengthen the organization both financially and programmatically so we can have an even greater impact.

**Q: Tell us about the new space in National City and what you hope to do there.**

**A:** It's incredible — 20,000 square feet of creative space for kids! We have two buildings, a main building that houses our resource library, our administrative space and our visual arts, music, industrial arts and media arts departments. The second building houses our dance and theater departments. It's like a mini campus! Our goal is to continue to deepen and grow our programs to serve more kids, especially in National City and South Bay.

**Q: Why is having a work space important to the kids you work with?**

**A:** Having a third space — not school or home — is critical to our model. One of our students recently said it very well: "School and home is where you have to keep secrets, ARTS is where you can let them all out." We believe having a safe, nurturing, inspirational environment for kids to escape their daily struggles can be transformational in itself. Then when you fill that space with positive adult mentors and role models, that's when magic begins to happen.

**Q: What is one thing people would be surprised to find out about you?**

**A:** I walked from Oregon to San Diego when I moved here. It took me two months, I only spent \$300, and I lost 30 pounds. I think I need to take a walk again and shed some LBs.

**Q: Please describe your ideal San Diego weekend.**

**A:** My work weeks are pretty intense and busy, so my ideal weekend is having no commitments or obligations — just freedom to be spontaneous or not. I enjoy being outside, spending time with my wife and kids — going to my kids sporting events. Cookout with friends and neighbors. Maybe hit the beach or local parks ... or just lounge around and read.

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