



COMMUNITY

A Place for Self-Expression

Beneath a full moon in September, a young couple stood at 3151 Cherokee, peeking through a window of the Fort Gondo Compound for the Arts. They appeared less curious than suspicious.

The Gondo's owner, a hyper 32-year-old named Galen Gondolfi, shot through the door in shorts, a T-shirt, tennis shoes and argyle socks. The couple's suspicion grew. "Don't be shy!" Gondolfi urged.

Inside, a local musician with a guitar and insectile shades performed for a crowd slumped on sunken couches. Cap'n Crunch made the rounds, and the gazers sipped beer and wine they'd brought themselves.

As the performer steered a song to its end, Gondolfi leapt to the stage, picked up a floor light and shined it on the performer from above. The crowd, which by then included our sidewalk couple, applauded

the triumphant, ironic finish.

The next afternoon, music was out and Artreach—a Sunday volunteer outreach for local kids—was in. Neighborhood children made signs and silk-screen shirts, under friendly instruction from four artist-volunteers. Shy girls smiled brightly in their just-made shirts. Young boys shelved their mini-bravados and went to work. "People call me an artist when I draw," one of the boys said as he approached the work table, newly smocked. Malik Jones, pictured left, is an Artreach regular, and in this photo stands in front of a mural by artists David Early and Ben Halsted, both of whom have taught classes for the program.

Nearly every week since February, the Fort Gondo Compound for the Arts has hosted these mini-rock shows and art classes, as well as gallery showings and performance art. The mood changes—from wink-wink pomp to real sincerity—but the focus remains on self-expression.

And it's growing. The effervescent Gondolfi, who has happily settled into St. Louis after working in Washington D.C., Chicago and Boston, recently bought two vacant buildings on the same block. One is an art store, and the other—called Radio Cherokee—is a music venue made out of an abandoned bar. Gondolfi's vision of his home block: "100 yards of artistic chaos and frenzied entropy." So drop by if you wish. And if suspicion overcomes you on the sidewalk, remember Gondolfi's advice: Don't be shy. —Stephen Schenkenberg