

Berkeley team aiming to make graffiti pay

By MICHELLE HOCTOR

AEROSOL artists at Berkeley are being shown how to find avenues for their work that don't land them in weekend detention.

Non-profit organisation Beyond Empathy (BE), is harnessing the young artists' skills and helping them develop business plans that one day may lead to paid employment.

Like it or not, said BE Illawarra project manager Gemma Parsons, graffiti art was not just a passing fad.

"It is probably the most influential arts and cultural movement of our generation. It's not just going to go away."

However, strict new graffiti laws which threatened first time offenders with jail and hefty fines, meant a more formalised process was needed, Ms Parsons said.

BE's public art project in Berkeley was helping to develop the artists' skills while creating and maintaining public art murals, providing legal options for graffiti and pathways to employment, she said.

Until recently, boarded up shops with graffiti tags cast a depressing appearance on the shopping precinct in Winnima Way.

But the youths, aged 15 to 25, are being shown how to approach businesses for permission to paint the walls, with murals that helped brighten the centre.

"We've done some signage on the shops, which lets people know there is life in Berkeley, (and) there are shops here open six days a week," Ms Parsons said.

Most recently artists had gained permission to paint an empty rental premises, with the paint and meals paid for by Wollongong City Council.

At the same time, she said, artists were being helped to put together art portfolios that might lead to employment in fields such as signwriting and graphic design.

Contracts for "permit walls" also had been drawn-up, which helped the artists to approach business owners, asking for



permission to develop their walls.

"With these new graffiti laws, we've got to be professional in our approach," Ms Parsons said.

"There's also a contract for businesses who want to engage these young people in paid employment," she said.

The bonus of such work was that taggers respected their peers' murals and refrained from defacing them.

Another benefit was the positive community feedback that boosted a young person's confidence.

Artists: Dylan Ison (above left), Lincoln McGee, Jack Wachtel and Thomas Hetet work on a project at Berkeley and (below) Cassandra Hallam with Lincoln and Jack. Pictures: KEN ROBERTSON

