



STEVE RUSSELL PHOTOS/TORONTO STAR

Building a dragster introduces kids to the trades. Clarissa Amofa, left, watches as Brandon Vickerd helps Ahijah Warren and staff member Miriam Elmi at the Jane-Finch Boys and Girls Club.

Drag racers teach kids that trades can be fun

After-school program helps Grade 6 students from Jane-Finch community get a feel for power tools

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Startled by the shriek of a pressure valve on the airbrush machine she was poised to use, Clarissa Amofa was gone — clear to the far side of the studio.

For six weeks, 14 young members of the Jane-Finch Boys and Girls Club had grown used to the sounds of power tools — the sanders, the drills, the hammers — but they weren't prepared for the explosion of noise from the paint machine brought in to the last class.

"It's just air coming out of the back. There's nothing to worry about," coaxed teacher Joey Fer-

nandez as the Grade 6 student cautiously returned to start painting the small wooden dragster — propelled by an electric belt sander — that she had helped build.

Welcome to *Pimp My Ride* meets *Tool Time* meets *Art Attack*, all rolled into one after-school program.

In a bid to help today's hi-tech kids get a feel for the skilled trades, York University's fine arts faculty invited students from the nearby Jane-Finch community for a crash course in building drag racers fuelled by power tools. The students worked in two teams and, by last week, were adding the finishing

touches on their competing masterpieces using the airbrush paint machines brought in by Fernandez and his brother Mike, who run a company that decorates motorcycles.

The students will race their tool-mobiles, tricked out with lightning bolts, fins and skulls, in a power-tool Grand Prix Tuesday at Yorkgate Mall on the northwest corner of Jane and Finch.

"It's an opportunity to straddle the trades and art and also break down the stigma people can attach to both," said Steven Laurie, the curator of York's art gallery who dreamed up the youth outreach program.

"Kids don't get introduced to the trades in elementary school any more, so I wanted to catch them

before high school to show them the diversity and creativity of jobs in the trades," said Laurie.

Before long, Clarissa had donned a dust mask and safety goggles and was dispensing orange paint from the airbrush nozzle along the edge of her team's dragster.

"I took the program because I wanted to learn how to use tools like the drill," said the shy 12-year-old from Brookview Middle School.

Kadiatu Barrie, the only other girl in the group, says she thought "it would be interesting to do something new. I used to think building things would be boring and hard. Now I know you get to build cool things." The 12-year-old already knows a Robertson from a Phillips screwdriver.

Brandon Vickerd, a sculpture pro-

fessor at York and one of a team of artists and trades people helping with the program, said he believes tool skills are a dying art.

"I have first-year sculpture students who don't know *how to* hold a hammer. They're just not being exposed to trades in school the way they were even 10 years ago," said Vickerd.

Bill Thornton, head of tech at nearby Westview Centennial Secondary School and part of the team running the program, says this kind of course teaches teamwork as well as building basics, but notes "parents often don't want their kids going into the trades. In the countries they came from, trades people are seen as servants, so they want them to go to university. But a lot drop out and go into construction."