

Teaching self-esteem to children with art

May 2, 2013 5:02 am

By Dave Zuchowski /

Angela Lowden believes in the power of art to change lives for the better, and the 64-year-old Mt. Lebanon resident eventually found a way to put her belief into action.

A 1986 graduate of the Art Institute of Pittsburgh, she worked in interior design before she and her husband, James, founded Art Expression Inc. in 2001.

The organization's mission is to use expressive art activities to alleviate the social inequalities that exist among children of varying abilities.

"The idea germinated a few years after I became a parent in 1986," Mrs. Lowden said. "As I watched my son, James, interact with his peers, I noticed that some children lacked the social skills to join in school activities and make friends. The goal of Art Expression is to help them develop social skills through art."

In 2001, she and her husband approached the Mt. Lebanon school board with their plan for after-school sessions for children who could benefit from art therapy without actually undergoing art therapy. The board approved their plan, and the first sessions were held for students recommended by their parents, teachers, guidance counselor or principal.

The program is designed for "any child who needs help with self-esteem, social skills, frustration, tolerance, anger management or just learning how to be part of a group," Mrs. Lowden said.

Art Expression currently is offered in Mt. Lebanon, South Allegheny, Keystone Oaks and Central Greene school districts and to date has reached more than 2,300 students.

The after-school sessions are free and conducted with an art therapist and two faculty facilitators. The six-class sessions are held twice during the school year, in the fall and in the spring. The classes meet once a week for 1 1/2 to two hours and are usually limited to 12 to 15 pupils with an equal mix of boys and girls.

Mrs. Lowden, who also has a degree in education from Duquesne University and taught social studies before she became an interior designer, sometimes serves as a facilitator.

Last month, she learned from the President's Committee on the Arts and Humanities that Art Expression is a finalist for the 2013 Arts and Humanities Youth Program Award. The committee reviewed 376 nominations from 49 states and the District of Columbia, and Art Expression was selected as one of 50 finalists.

The award winner, which will be announced at the end of June, will receive a \$10,000 grant and an invitation to attend the White House awards ceremony hosted by first lady Michelle Obama.

"Art Expression Inc. has provided tremendous benefit to the individuals that have been involved in the program," said James Fraasch, a former Mt. Lebanon school board member. "They use art to foster growth in self-esteem, communication skills and problem solving. ... Most importantly, their program has produced results. I have personally heard from some of the parents that have children in this program, and they are amazed at how their children are able to open up and blossom."

For the initial years that Art Expression served children, the Lowdens financed the organization. The cost to put on each six-week session is roughly \$1,800, which includes compensation for the art therapist and two facilitators and art supplies.

Then, in 2007, the program acquired nonprofit status and branched out to additional school districts. A recent \$5,000 grant from the Grable Foundation enabled Art Expression to add Central Greene to its programming.

"By going out into rural areas like Central Greene, we're able to serve children who don't have the same resources as those in urban areas," Mrs. Lowden said, adding that they would like to expand the program to more districts.

Another Art Expression component called Operation Military Kids works with the children of military families. On Sunday, Mrs. Lowden visited the YMCA Camp Kon-O-Kwee Spencer in Fombell near Zelienople to help children of military families improve their social skills.

An activity called Wish Fish was held at the camp. Created by the art therapist, Wish Fish had parents and their children fish for compliments, Mrs. Lowden said. "By saying what they admire in one another, the participants increase one another's self-esteem," she explained.

Another project for the military children was held at Rania's, a Pittsburgh caterer, where the children were shown how to cook healthy meals. Franco Harris showed up as a surprise guest, and the event was broadcast on KDKA-TV's "Pittsburgh Alive Today."

Dave Zuchowski, freelance writer: suburbanliving@post-gazette.com.

First Published May 2, 2013 5:02 am