

Art expression: Markham pupils learn social skills inside and out

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By Mary Niederberger, Pittsburgh Post-Gazette



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Third-graders Eli Holtschlag, left, and Miller Overmeyer cut out magazine photographs to decorate painted boxes in the Art Expression program at Markham Elementary School in Mt. Lebanon. The finished boxes will represent how the pupils view themselves, and how others view them.

There's an image of ourselves that we share with the world every day. Then there's the part of our psyche that we keep private and locked away -- where secrets and emotions lie hidden.

In recent weeks, a group of third- and fourth-grade pupils at Markham Elementary in Mt. Lebanon have been trying to illustrate both sides of themselves via an art project that is part of an after-school program called Art Expression.

The program uses art as its vehicle, but its real goal is to support pupils' social skills development.

The Markham pupils have been creating "inside/outside boxes." Art therapist Ellen Filar said the children were instructed to decorate the outside of their boxes to reflect their "outside selves" and the inside to show their "inside selves."

The pupils painted both the inside and outside of the boxes and cut pictures from magazines to decorate. They also used some small trinkets that Mrs. Filar provided.

Not surprisingly, the outside of the girls' boxes featured pictures of cell phones, sunglasses and fashion models. The boys boxes featured pictures of muscled arms, cars, televisions and remote controls and cartoon characters.

But what were the secrets hidden inside?

For the boys, not much. The pictures inside looked much like those outside or the inside was empty, such as the box of Vincent Liu, 9. "There's nothing inside because I am not a keeper of secrets," Vincent said.

But for the girls, there were a few.

Isabella Romano, 8, had a picture of make-up inside her box. "I like to take my sister's make-up and put it on," she whispered in explanation.

Inside Sydney Winner's box, there was a picture of a cell phone and a girl with curly hair. "I would like to have both of those," said Sydney, 9. She painted the inside of her box black because the color "gives strong feelings but is simple at the same time and that's how I am."

The Art Expression program was created by Mt. Lebanon resident Angela Lowden, a former teacher-turned-interior designer, who has degrees in education and art.

She said she created the program because of her "love of children and love of art." Until this year, it was also financed by Mrs. Lowden and her husband, James. She declined to say how much she has spent on the program.

Mrs. Lowden said the program started in Jefferson and Mellon middle schools in 2001. "We started it in the middle schools because we thought that's where the program was needed the most. Those are the years when the pressure really starts to mount," she said.

Over the years some elementary schools were added, and this year, for the first time, the school district will split the cost of the program and it will be offered at all seven elementary buildings as well as the middle schools.

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.

Pupils are referred to the program by counselors and teachers. If there is enough space, letters are sent home to parents asking if they would like to enroll their children. At the elementary level, the group is kept to two grade levels so there isn't a large gap in the ages of the children.

The group size is limited to 12-14 pupils at each school, and the programs often have waiting lists. The groups are an even mix of boys and girls and there are typical and special needs pupils included, said Janet Niedzwicki, Mt. Lebanon's inclusion specialist.

Along with learning art techniques, pupils in the program learn to follow directions, problem solve, have patience and to try new things. During their sessions they are also guided by the adults in appropriate social interactions and to feel a sense of accomplishment in their artistic creations and relationships with peers.

Mrs. Lowden recently incorporated the Art Expression program as a nonprofit entity and is hoping to have it adopted by other school districts.

In the Mt. Lebanon schools, the program is operated as an open studio for the middle-school pupils. That means they are free to choose the type of art project they work on based on the supplies available.

At the elementary level, the pupils are directed as a group to work on the same project individually. At Markham, in addition to the art therapist, school counselor Amy Whealdon, and special education teacher Gemma Pahler worked with the students.

At the beginning of each session, before pupils work on their art project, they draw sketches based on a word of the day. Last week the word was "frightened." Thunder and lightening and storms that make the power go out were among the most common things the pupils drew. Second on their list were bugs and spiders.

Throughout the session, pupils interacted with each other and with their teachers in a relaxed atmosphere that wouldn't be possible during the structured school day. That allows some of the pupils to open up and relax more than they might while in class, the teachers said.

Markham Principal Robert Mallery said he has seen the program give some pupils more confidence in the classroom. "Some students are very quiet and withdrawn and do not express themselves. This gives them an opportunity to be more open about their feelings," he said.

Stacy de las Alas, an art therapist who works with the middle school Art Expression pupils, said the program gives some pupils who might not normally interact the chance to form relationships.

"I have seen friendships build within the group among students who never would have talked to one another before," Mrs. de las Alas said.

She said the art projects also help pupils to express their emotions and to learn new habits.

For instance, one pupil created an "angry emotions box" to express his frustrations. Another pupil who was extremely "regimented and ritualized" and always wanted to work with sticks and glue eventually tried painting.

"It helped him to come out of his shell," she said.

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