

Mt. Lebanon teen combines art, mentoring for Girl Scout Gold Award project

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By Harry Funk



When she was 6, Marie Erickson joined Girl Scouts, about the same time she started attending the Art Expression program after school in Mt. Lebanon.

At 17, she has combined her activities in the two groups to earn her Gold Award. The award is Girl Scouting's highest honor and the equivalent of a Boy Scout Eagle Award.

Her Gold Award project, on which she worked for much of 2014, has involved creating materials to encourage high school students to become mentors for Art Expression participants.

"I just loved the program," the Mt. Lebanon High School junior said about Art Expression. "I don't really consider myself to be an artist or talented person, but I just got a lot out of it. It's a very positive environment and very encouraging for young people."

Art Expression focuses on developing children's social skills through art and inclusiveness.

After participating in Art Expression throughout her elementary years, she returned as a high school freshman to help work with younger students.

"She was asked to be a volunteer," said Angela Lowden, the organization's founder and president, "and she thought of this student mentor program. We're very proud of her."

Her Gold Award project includes writing a guidebook for mentors. Cheryl Silinskas, vice president of the Art Expression board and art facilitator for the program, edited the guidebook, although she said it didn't need much editing.

"She's been a joy to work with, and she is inspiring to the kids," said Ms. Silinskas. "I believe she's a perfect testament to what we do and how it helps children. They gain so much confidence

in the way we help them with their art activities.

“We see over and over again the students who benefit,” she continued. “Marie definitely caught on to something that really sparked her creativity and her strength of character.”

Along with the guidebook is a video that further elaborates on Art Expression and its mentoring opportunities. Helping Marie produce the video were Kelly Hois, a Mt. Lebanon High School sophomore, and Michelle Kramer, film teacher.

Sydney Pell, a high school junior, was mentor in the program pilot, volunteering at Art Expression’s after-school sessions, talking to students and providing insight on art projects.

Marie also credits Kelly Donovan, Mt. Lebanon teacher sponsor for Art Expression, and Stacy de las Alas, art therapist for the organization, with substantially helping her endeavors.

At school, Marie also is a member of Mt. Lebanon’s fencing and girls golf teams, is student council junior class president and plays violin in the orchestra.

“I’ve always had a lot of energy,” she explained. “If I don’t have anything to do at any time, I always find something.”

Perhaps not surprisingly, she plans a career in education.

“I’ve known for years that I wanted to be a teacher,” Marie said. “I think being a teacher is one of the most important jobs. I love learning and want other kids to have that same experience.”

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