

TAKING ART TO YOUTH | ARTISTS IN THE CLASSROOM PROGRAM BRINGS ARTS EDUCATION TO LOCAL SCHOOLS

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PICTURED: Student in Gaby Nath's art class, 2019. *Photo courtesy of Artists in the Classroom*

by Mike Nelson

Art in any form (visual or performance) is, almost by definition, fun, especially for children. But it can be so much more — especially for children.

Just ask those who teach art to children through Artists in the Classroom (AIC), Ventura County’s long-running program bringing visual and performance art to K-12 students in schools that might otherwise struggle to make art resources and funding available.

“You see students tap into an unknown area of themselves,” said Alina Cenal, who has taught theater and dance in the program for 25 years. “They’re discovering their gifts and abilities right in front of you, especially in the performance scenario. You see a shy child find her voice, or a super-active child focus his energy, and it’s amazing how it transforms them. Their regular classroom teacher who thought she knew her students will say, ‘I’m seeing sides of my students I’ve never seen.’”

“Art in any medium is so powerful as a tool to heal us, to provide comfort and groundedness,” added Shirley Palomino, a 2D and 3D multicultural visual art teacher in her third year with AIC. “All of us need it, especially now with the pandemic, with questions about race, with how we value and treat one another.”

“And with children,” Palomino continued, “I can offer them not just lessons in creativity but allow them to feel comfortable, and the space to express what they are feeling. And if I can contextualize things for them through art — like social justice concerns — I can help them feel seen and heard.”



Students in Shirley Palomino’s Multi-Cultural Arts Class, 2019. *Photo courtesy of Artists in the Classroom*

Established three decades ago by a coalition of community leaders interested in arts education, Artists in the Classroom offers eight-week “teaching residencies” in dance, music, poetry, visual and performing arts. Overseen by the Ventura County Office of Education, it has been administered since 2014 by the Ventura County Arts Council.

“It’s the only multi-disciplinary arts residency program available to every K-8 school in the county,” said Deby Tygell, program administrator, and herself a veteran elementary school teacher. More than 220 residencies serving more than 3,000 students were conducted in 2019 at more than a dozen elementary schools in eight county school districts.

The professional artist-educators who conduct the classes tailor their courses to the appropriate grade level, said Tygell, “striving not only to teach art but to embrace inclusivity.”

Such is the mindset of instructor Gaby Zavala Hath, who works with special needs students in teaching mixed media, murals and “art for peace,” often using recycled materials to “bring a mindfulness of our waste to our youth.”

“Seeing the kids get so excited finding and using color-coordinated recycled materials, and just watching their minds work, is such a joy,” said Hath. “I’ve never taught ‘cookie cutter’ art classes because it’s important not to feel stifled. I tell them, ‘There are no mistakes in art, so be gentle to yourself.’ And especially for those special needs students, art is a healing experience.”

Many instructors bring a multi-cultural and historical awareness to their lessons, said Tygell, “helping students gain an understanding of their own and other cultures, past and present.”

Culture plays an important part in Palomino’s classes. She has utilized the example of British-Liberian artist Lina Iris Viktor to teach fifth graders.

“We can take inspiration from our ancestry and apply it to art in order to help better understand ourselves,” she said. “These were 9- and 10-year-old students, many of Mexican descent, and they were so excited to paint, to be given the tools, to look at the artwork that each of them created.”

Such experiences are also rewarding for the teachers.



Artwork from an Artists in the Classroom 3D art class, 2019. *Photo courtesy of Artists in the Classroom.*

“All the schools I’ve worked with are amazing, students and teachers alike,” said Michele Foster, who teaches mixed media and “Meet the Masters” classes to K-8 students. “I get to build a real community with the students, who get to admire one another’s work and appreciate each other’s creativity. Art is about having fun and doing the best you can.”

Many teachers currently conduct their classes via Zoom or other social platforms during the pandemic, which currently restricts or prohibits on-site gatherings. “There was a learning curve,” admitted Foster, “but it’s turned out well. The students may not get to look over each other’s shoulders while creating their work, but they can ask questions and get assistance if they need it.”

Online exhibits for students and their families to experience add to the overall enjoyment, teachers say.

“It’s important to have peer approval and community acceptance,” said Hath.

Cenal, currently teaching theater via Zoom, enjoys the “out of the box” experience.

“It’s like doing film and TV, shooting with a box as it were,” she said. “You learn other elements of storytelling by adapting to the medium — moving toward or away from the

camera, raising or lowering your voice. And you can still dialogue among kids and create an experience that helps them grow.”

The fee for an eight-week Artists in the Classroom residency is \$575. Limited discounts are available with multiple residencies per school. The Ventura County Arts Council secures additional funding to help pay for arts supplies not generally available in a school's materials inventory and not included in the cost of the residency. For more information on the program, contact Deby Tygell at 805-658-2213 or education@vcartscouncil.org or visit vcartscouncil.org/programs/artists-in-the-classroom.