

Volunteers get creative for school arts

By **Michelle Breier** 6 A.M. FEB. 3, 2013

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Kindergartner Amber Sanford (left) enlists the help of Cathy Hamilton, coordinator for the Escondido Alliance for Arts Education, in blowing on her watercolor to speed the drying process in class Friday at Juniper Elementary. — *Peggy Peattie*

ESCONDIDO — Fifth-graders can be a pretty dramatic bunch. But on the last Friday in January, the drama among 10- and 11-year-olds at L.R. Green Elementary was all in the name of art.

Drama instructor Lenka Juric led about 120 students in breathing techniques, posture, and voice tones as the first class began for “sm{ART} Fridays,” a new volunteer arts education program.

“They were willing and attentive. They were hungry for it, and I was willing to serve it up for them,” said Juric, executive artistic director for youth theater group Arts Off Broadway.

Over the next eight weeks, Juric will help the students develop skills to dance, sing a song, perform a monologue, or recite an original poem in front of their classmates and during a city arts festival.

At L.R. Green and six other Escondido elementary and middle schools, about two dozen professional artists like Juric have committed to teaching visual and performing arts over the next two months for sm{ART} Fridays. The program — with an accompanying citywide “sm{ART} Festival” on April 13 in Grape Day Park — is the result of nearly three years of planning by the Escondido Alliance for Arts Education.

The alliance is among the volunteer or nonprofit programs that are supplementing arts education in public schools, including Oceanside and Encinitas, as districts juggle budget cuts and pressure to raise test scores. Officials in Escondido’s K-8 district have placed a high value on the arts. But when parents and artists have felt it wasn’t enough, they have stepped up with such programs as Reidy Creek Elementary’s FAVE, Fine Arts Volunteer Educators; Bernardo Elementary’s “Art Docents”; and outreach and community programs at the California Center for the Arts, Escondido.

“There is overwhelming data ... that clearly demonstrates the strong correlation between participation in meaningful arts education and a student’s overall success in school and actually, oftentimes, in life,” said Linda Woods, a longtime Escondido Union School District trustee.

The Escondido alliance started as a group of volunteers, educators, parents and artists who joined to find a way to increase arts education, particularly in lower-income schools.

“Twenty years ago, every school in Escondido had an art docent program,” alliance coordinator Cathy Hamilton said. “Now ... our more affluent schools are the only ones that are able to keep that going, and that’s through their PTAs, an abundance of volunteers, (and) parents who have time.”

Volunteer-led art programs struggled to continue at many lower-income schools, Hamilton said.

The Escondido alliance launched in April 2010 under the guidance of the California Alliance for Arts Education, a statewide organization that advocates for “quality arts education” for all students in K-12 public schools. In the Escondido group’s early stages, its objective was to identify strengths and find the best way to improve weaknesses in the arts education, Hamilton said.

“There is no (public) money,” Hamilton said. “You can’t just go to school board meetings and complain about what they don’t have. You have to come up with a solution.”

The alliance’s work evolved into the sm{ART} Fridays program, which was in full swing Friday, the official start date. Professional artists were scheduled to teach watercolors to first-graders at Orange Glen Elementary and pottery to middle-schoolers at Nicolaysen Community Day School. Anita Roberts’ Juniper kindergartners were learning to layer colors and shapes in a mixed-media lesson

from Escondido artist Carol Murphy. Del Dios eighth-graders already have started hip-hop dance lessons with Juric.

All of the artworks, performance and visual, created on sm{ART} Fridays will be displayed at the citywide youth arts festival. Schools not in the program are encouraged to submit works as well, Hamilton said.

“(The festival) can build momentum and motivate our community and rally around this idea of ... creativity (in) the classroom,” she said.

The alliance wants the program to be sustainable, expanding it year after year and funding it through grants and donations.

Escondido isn’t alone in its arts education efforts.

In Oceanside, Deborah Dodaro partnered with the school district to create a musical theater outreach program at middle schools.

Dodaro, director of the Oceanside Theatre Company Youth Academy, is in rehearsals for “Once on This Island” with sixth-, seventh- and eighth-graders at Lincoln Middle School. Each semester over the next two years, she will take the production to a different Oceanside middle school. After the cycle, she hopes to start over with a different musical.

Dodaro, an Oceanside resident who has taught in Carlsbad for years, was inspired to start the program by the construction of a new theater at Oceanside High. She wanted to introduce middle school students to musical theater so that they might try it in high school. Dodaro and colleagues noticed a drop in high school theater sign-ups in Carlsbad after some middle schools dropped the program.

Encinitas has a coalition under the California Alliance for Arts Education. For its new coordinator, Georgia Schmid, relying on volunteers to teach art doesn’t fulfill the alliance’s mission to provide quality arts education for every child. Schmid’s goal is to have a credentialed art teacher in every elementary school. Ensuring that students have access to quality arts classes is personal for Schmid, a professional dancer who said she was “not a book and paper girl” in school. Arts classes provided her “with a way to connect and engage in my primary education.”

“I would have been lost without it, which is why I am an advocate for the arts in schools,” Schmid said.

Roberts, the kindergarten teacher in Escondido, views the sm{ART} Fridays as a gift. Calling herself “passionate” about art. Roberts said she tries to lead an art project at least once a week. She doesn’t have any parent art helpers.

“Art calms the savage class,” she said of her lively bunch of 5-year-olds. “They refocus on their academics after an art project. I always find I get better writing after an art project because they’ve had an experience. It’s opened the door.”

Benefits: Numerous interviews with arts education experts emphasized research that shows arts education leads to better attendance, improvement in all academic areas, and the development of critical-thinking skills. The Washington, D.C.-based Arts Education Partnership added that schools with arts in the curriculum see less conflict among students, and that students are more engaged and motivated to attend.

What's required: California has a "Visual and Performing Arts Framework" that puts in place content standards adopted in 2001. A 2000 bill called for the standards and stated "that instruction in the visual and performing arts should be made available to all students." The bill does not require schools to follow the standards, nor does not require an assessment in the visual and performing arts. Funding: In 2006, California received block grant funding for the arts in public schools, the California Alliance said. The state's fiscal crisis led legislators to allow districts to spend money designated for art on whatever they deem essential.

Resources

Escondido Alliance for Arts Education: EscoArtEd@yahoo.com,
artsed411.org/Escondido or on Facebook

California Alliance for Arts Education: artsed411.org;

Arts Education Partnership: aep-arts.org;

ArtsEdSearch:cq artsedsearch.org

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