
Creativity on wheels brings art, fun to kids

By [Kaellen Hessel](#) of the Journal Sentinel

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"I need more beans!" one boy shouted as he created a mosaic self-portrait using macaroni and legumes.

He and his friends were making art in the park during a warm afternoon at Scooter's Garden of Hope, across from Oliver Wendell Holmes Elementary School, as a result of the Artists Working in Education truck studio.

The minivans - brightly painted and covered with suns, clouds and flowers - roll into parks in low-income neighborhoods for six weeks throughout the summer, bringing art supplies and artists. They're usually greeted by 15 to 30 neighborhood children.

"I like that it comes to the neighborhood and the children don't have to leave the neighborhood to do art," said Juanita Savage, a third-grade instructor for the Holmes' summer program that brought her students to the park.

On Wednesday, the children learned about texture as they made their macaroni mosaics, "Where the Wild Things Are" puppets and recyclable 3-D sculptures. A girl with a toothy smile made sure her self-portrait had lots of smiling teeth, while a boy with glasses accentuated the fact on his mosaic.

With each afternoon session the children learn different fundamental art elements, such as line, color and form. Leticia Figueroa, truck studio intern, said that aspect is what makes the program unusual. Other programs just bring art supplies to children; this one teaches them about art as well, said Figueroa, a Milwaukee Institute of Art & Design junior.

Many of the projects are based on traditional media usually taught in schools but that many students no longer have the opportunity to experience, said Reanna Ottoson,

program outreach specialist.

The organization was founded in 1998 by artists, teachers and college professors worried about decreases in funding for the arts in schools, Ottoson said. Artists Working in Education also has a school studio program in which artists become resident artists at schools for 32 hours as they help them complete a major project. This is the 13th summer the truck studio has been around, she said.

Community building

Kim Loper, a lead truck instructor, emphasized the community-building aspect of the program.

"It's really important right now with art getting cuts and kids having nothing to do," she said. Loper, who has always wanted to use art as a tool for social justice, said it's a better alternative to many things.

Even though the trucks are only in a park for one week, Loper said they're building relationships that help strengthen the community. Before coming to an area, the truck studio workers each spend an hour a week handing out fliers, meeting people and reaching out to community leaders and local businesses, she said.

Loper said she'll see students from a previous session across town or years later. They always remember the trucks and are excited to see the artists again, Loper said.

It gets neighbors to meet and talk, Ottoson said. Sometimes even the parents will get involved and demonstrate how to make traditional crafts, she said.

Tailored to culture

Projects are also tailored to the communities the children are from, Ottoson said. "We expose them to a wide variety of things and bring in things unique to that community," she said.

If they're working in a predominantly black community they might read "Joshua's Masai Mask" and make similar African masks, learn about quilt making or base a project off Jean-Michel Basquiat - a black neo-expressionist artist from the 1980s. In a Hispanic neighborhood they might make traditional Mexican folk art using tin, Ottoson said.

In this way "they see themselves or their culture reflected in the work they're learning about," she said.

This summer they're focusing on incorporating literacy into the art projects, Loper said.

"It's really important for kids to keep learning even out of school," Loper said.

For one sculpture, the children were given words to trade and put the ones that described themselves on their piece, Loper said. They would put a big word like one that means arrogant on their sculpture and ask one another what it meant, she said. They looked up words in dictionaries and started using them to playfully insult each other, Loper said.

"You're too boisterous! Ha ha, got him!" she imitated.


No matter what the project, the staff makes sure to keep the assignments open-ended, Ottoson said. This way there's plenty of room for personal expression. It makes sense for a program whose mission is to help children become creative, inquisitive, confident, flexible and imaginative.

"You can make whatever you want," instructed Loper as they moved on to their next project. "But I want you to think about texture."

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