

Celebrating the Arts: A Children's Fine Arts Festival

The arts have always gotten short shrift in the schools, but the current standardized testing craze has put them in even greater jeopardy. At one elementary school in Oregon, however, the arts take center stage for a full week each year.

BY ROBIN WRIGHT FROMHERZ

SOME OF OUR best ideas are developed around a table laden with food. And conversations around a bountiful table were the beginning of the Fine Arts Festival, an effort launched in 2000 to enhance the role of the arts in the elementary curriculum of schools in the tri-county area surrounding Willamette University in Salem, Oregon. The festival was a success and has been repeated annually ever since.

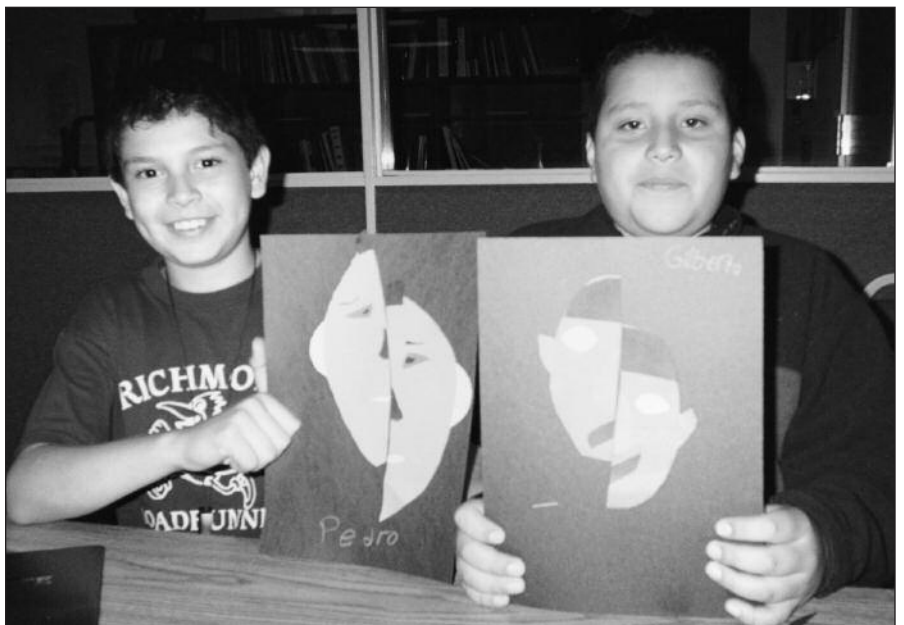
Colleagues at Willamette University and friends were brainstorming what could be done to combat the increasing encroachment of standards-based test preparation on the school day. While teachers understand the need for standards and the criteria for meeting them, in an attempt to meet the goals of standards-based assessments, they may tend to "teach to the test." The time necessary for such test preparation often comes from les-

sening a school's emphasis on the arts.

The *National Standards for Arts Education (NSAE)*, published by the Consortium of National Arts Education Associations, refer to the arts as "society's gifts to itself." And we saw it as our responsibility as educators to see that children are able, in the words of the *NSAE*, to "construct a vital relationship with the arts." Because of my strong interest in enhancing the role of the arts in

elementary education, I volunteered to chair a project designed to do just that.

The first contact to be made was with the principal of Richmond Elementary School. Schools in the mid-Willamette Valley of Oregon have partnerships with businesses or institutions in their neighborhoods, and Richmond Elementary is the partner school of Willamette University. Therefore, it was the ideal pilot site



Children participating in the festival have an opportunity to use Willamette University facilities to pursue their art interests. These self-portraits were based on the style of Picasso.

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for the Fine Arts Festival.

Principal Kathy Bebe met with me, and we mapped out what we wanted to happen for the children and their teachers at Richmond. We estimated costs and drew up schedules. We decided that a weeklong festival, to be held on Willamette University's campus in late spring, would be the best arrangement. Teachers and classroom assistants would attend the festival with the children, not as teachers but as learners. The "teachers" at the festival would be professional artists from the surrounding area. Children would be bused from Richmond to Willamette at 9 a.m. and returned to Richmond by 2:45 p.m. each day for an entire week. We hoped to have one day devoted to each of the following: visual arts, dance, writing, music, and theater. The order of the days would depend to some extent on the schedules of the artists enlisted as "teachers."

But this was just brainstorming. We took our plan to the teachers of the intermediate-level classes (grades 3, 4, and 5) at Richmond. Their response was highly enthusiastic. However, the teachers reminded us that children who attend Richmond are primarily of Hispanic backgrounds and that the school is a bilingual school. Children from Asia, Russia, and Europe are also represented. Thus we would need to make sure that we had translators for children so all could benefit equally. Moreover, children with special needs at Richmond are fully included in all classes and activities, and the teachers outlined the specific arrangements we would need to make to comply with their IEPs (individualized education programs).

Kathy and I gained considerable momentum from our interaction with the teachers. Our energy levels were soaring, and we decided to take the next step: ask the dean of the Wil-

lamette University College of Liberal Arts for his blessing and for some of his money to fund the festival. We came to our appointment prepared with outlines and budgets. (If you try to replicate our festival, be sure to send a copy of your plans and budget to your prospective funding source *before* your meeting to allow the funding agency time to review and understand your project.)

Dean Larry Cress was a receptive listener and asked searching questions that strengthened our proposal. We left his office with a promise for matching funds. For those who do not have an existing partnership with a college or university or with a local business, alternative funding sources might be the local newspaper, local arts foundations, government agencies, and local service organizations. Don't be afraid to explore the possibilities.

Our relief at securing funding soon gave way to the panic of realizing that we had to have our Fine Arts Festival up and running in a few short months. Once our initial trepidation had turned into productive planning, the excitement returned, and the planning process blossomed. We met regularly with planning team teachers in the early morning before the school day started. We found it most productive to come to meetings with our ideas sketched out and then ask teachers to tweak or modify them.

Once the dates for the weeklong festival had been chosen, we began our search for artists who would be willing to share their talents for very little monetary return. In planning the budget, we made sure that the artists would be paid, even if our budget allowed us to offer only a token of the worth of the work contributed.

To find artists, I set up an information cycle. In preparation for Theater Day, for example, I asked the

theater teacher in my local high school to provide names of troupes that visit schools. The Oregon Tygres Heart Shakespeare Company has a grant to help them fund travel to schools, so I contacted the company and was able to secure a spot on its schedule of visits. The theater teacher also put me in contact with publishers of children's plays. I found a company that published children's operas and chose one called *Monkey See, Monkey Do* as our student production. (In subsequent years, we performed *Sid the Serpent Who Wanted to Sing*, *Starbird*, and *Pinocchio*.) Because I volunteer in the school's costume shop, I was also able to enlist the help of the costume director and fellow seamstresses.

Similar avenues opened as I searched for visual artists. A friend who teaches about the lives of famous artists and demonstrates how they worked agreed to teach a Monet unit and referred me to a potter who makes bird whistles. We also decided to include wearable art on Visual Arts Day, and we designed a T-shirt with a picture frame that the children could fill in with fabric paints supplied by the area Wal-Mart stores. (Wal-Mart also gave us a 10% discount on all sewing supplies and materials.) Next, I approached a weaver I knew, and she agreed to lead a session on bead weaving. The final activity that we arranged for Visual Arts Day was a tour of the campus art gallery.

Dance Day was highlighted by the dancing of an African American dance troupe that I discovered through an article in the local newspaper. This professional troupe interacted beautifully with the children and entertained and enthralled them for an entire afternoon. We also had the choreographer from a local theater company teach jazz and modern dance. Two staff members from the School



Each year the festival presents an opera. Past productions have included Monkey See, Monkey Do, Starbird, and Sid the Serpent Who Wanted to Sing (cast members, left).

of Education at Willamette University taught country and western, and my college-age children taught ballet. We borrowed costumes and props from a ballet school so the children could dance with scarves, hats, and tutus.

Music Day started out to be a problem for us as the area high schools were holding graduation on the very day when we needed their musicians. However, we were able to ask John Doan, a nationally recognized music historian and performer, to work with the children. He showed original instruments, played songs, shared a slide show, and engaged the children in making music. College music majors led a session on the orchestra and on the life and times of J. S. Bach. A local harpist came to play and speak of her art, and the children learned how to play chimes.

The big event of Music Day was the afternoon opera. A real full-length children's opera was performed in matinee and evening performances. We obtained the rights to the show and purchased rehearsal tapes. The main characters were trained singers who were asked to have their roles totally learned by five days before the performance. Fifteen children were selected to be in the show, and they

learned their songs and dances during the week of the festival. The chorus and other roles were filled by professors, teachers, and local residents. We had rehearsals on Saturday and after school on Monday and Tuesday. We had a dress rehearsal on Wednesday evening. Our director worked with speed and finesse, and our small orchestra managed to keep us all on the beat. Volunteers constructed sets, and all of the costumes were created or borrowed.

Because so many elementary schools in the area wanted to come to our opera, we opened the afternoon performance to schools other than Richmond. Schools were treated to a visit from a main character in the production, who explained what an opera is, told the story of the opera being produced, and offered etiquette tips for attending an opera. The teachers in these schools received a packet of information to create an opera learning center for their classrooms. After the performance, all the characters mingled with the audience and interacted with the children.

Theater Day included a makeup workshop led by a professional actor/model and his fiancée. A trip to the historic Elsinor Theatre, which included an organ recital and a trip

backstage, was capped off by training in theater games. In 2002 we added a puppet workshop and show, presented by Tears of Joy, a Portland-based puppet troupe. The children were charmed and eager to create their own puppets and show.

Writing Day featured a visit by an author and her pet pig, Priscilla, who is featured in several children's books. The illustrators from Flying Rhino publishing company shared their craft and presented each child with a free book. A colleague had met the founders of Flying Rhino, mentioned our project, and made the connection. Children learned how to write an editorial in support of the arts and also wrote "name poetry." At the end of the day, a professor of English from Willamette University came to share her writing and supported the children as they participated in an open-mike coffee house, where they could share their writing.

To enlist artists takes a certain amount of "pushiness" and a great deal of blind faith. But the phoning, connecting, and collecting of artists was a joy, and I learned so much. The more I shared my excitement for the Fine Arts Festival, the easier it was to engage artists.

The week of our festival was truly an art explosion for all of us involved in the project. Just listening to the children's comments justified all our hard work. "Do you think Bach would consider this a fugue?" asked a student who then sang a little tune. "Look, I can jeté across the lawn," said another. "I never knew how much fun it was to be in an opera," offered a third.

Your school can also catch arts fever! And if you do, be sure to share your successes and frustrations with other educators. Some kinds of contagion are just too good to keep to ourselves. ■