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CREATING COMMUNITY THROUGH ART

A PRIDE-funded art project at Lafayette School in Elizabeth led to some surprising outcomes when students took the lead.

BY PHILIP AVILA

Playground art project brings Elizabeth community together

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If Elizabeth Education Association member Edward D'Alessandro had to write a lesson plan for his playground project, it would probably reference the philosopher and educator John Dewey and the artist Keith Haring.

But then, Dewey was never one for rigid lesson planning. He believed students should be able to take part in their own learning, interacting in ways that may be totally unanticipated, through projects designed and planned by the teacher that lend themselves to the give and take between participants, communicating ideas in a mutually respectful and cooperative way.

"He wrote not only about education but about how people learn," D'Alessandro said. "He said that most learning is collateral. In other words what you set out to do isn't necessarily what you're going to learn."

Dewey's writings had a huge impact on D'Alessandro and shaped the unexpected twists and turns that the Playground Project took as it moved from a concept to a highly successful

community art event. When over a hundred elementary students and their parents came together at Elizabeth's Toussaint L'Ouverture-Marquis de Lafayette School on a sunny autumn day to bring to life a series of mandala designs, intermingled with anime figures and hopscotch patterns, the event was as much a pleasant surprise to its organizer as it was to participants.

"We had something completely different in mind at the outset," D'Alessandro says. "And when we do it again, we're going to do the exact same thing only it's going to be completely different."

In years past, D'Alessandro had guided his high school students through several mural projects. But while school administrators sometimes had very specific ideas about subject matter, his students were more engaged with the free-flowing creations of artists like Keith Haring and anime art. Those initial mural projects gave him the confidence to take on whole school playgrounds.



Parents, teachers and students color in the mandala designs. They'll be able to create new color patterns after the next rainstorm.



The performance [the act of painting] becomes as important as the resulting painting. — Keith Haring

He had already motivated a group of Thomas Jefferson Arts Academy students and alumni to form a group called the Elizabethartworkers, which regularly posts their best work on Facebook and Instagram. But could the students be engaged for months at a time through all kinds of weather to do the kind of street art that would awaken a community? Could they work in tandem with students at an elementary school across town?

Students take the lead

The answer was yes. And that's because the students took a leading role, figuring out how to overcome challenges and solve problems as they arose.

There were numerous cancellations because of rain. And when the blistering heat of the past summer came, the students figured out that working in the shadows of the morning hours was a lot more productive.

One student, Victor Amaya, emerged as the leader, taking charge of the mandala designs. But rather than fully paint the designs on the playground, the group opted for white-paint outlines. That way the work became an interactive community project where children from the neighboring community would have the opportunity to color them in at a celebratory event. While the outlines would be permanent, the colors would be tempera paint and chalk that would wash away with the rain and could be created over and over again.

The result would be a playground that could change with the seasons, or even on a whim.

And when it came to whimsy, another talented art student, Samantha Gonzalez, squeezed in anime-like figures that would prove to be a big hit on the day of the event. She also designed a T-shirt for participants. Groovy hopscotch patterns were also added.

The act of painting

As Haring once asserted: "The performance [the act of painting] becomes as important as the resulting painting." That's what happened on Oct. 29 when the students at Lafayette school devoted an afternoon to collaborating on bringing the project to fruition. Working individually and in groups, they took on the artistic challenge of creating a playground masterpiece together.

Some parents couldn't resist picking up paintbrushes and diving in. Preschool and kindergarten students worked alongside elementary and high school students. While young children held a brush for perhaps the first time, older students made sure there was an adequate supply of materials. Some swayed to the music. Others formed a line for a slice of pizza after picking up a student-designed T-shirt. There was even a fire engine on site, leading the fire marshal to marvel at the unprecedented community get-together that art had produced. It seemed like everyone was smiling. And they were smiles of pride.

If the word "spontaneous" comes to mind, that's exactly what D'Alessandro was shooting for.

He said Dewey viewed the playground as a kind of laboratory so educators can see where children are at and guide them to the next level of experience.

"He would watch kids on playgrounds. How did they



Lafayette School students have fun with sidewalk chalk, filling in the mandala designs.



form their groups? How did they make their rules? They had to arbitrate among themselves or the play would break down. I believe we really saw that happening [in the playground project].”

Like planning a wedding

Beth D'Alessandro, Ed's wife, who teaches art at Lafayette, joked that the project was almost as complicated as planning a wedding. And it truly did involve a lot of collaboration.

The project was made possible with an NJEA PRIDE in Public Education grant and support from the Elizabeth Education Association.

Chris Mingoia, principal of Lafayette, was receptive and encouraged the initial stages. When he left, James Mondesir, the new principal, provided enthusiastic backing. He recognized how the project would stimulate problem-solving and creativity. Many EEA members lent helping hands both before and during the event.

The Elizabeth Fire Department was on hand to give parents and students safety information, while Trinitas Hospital provided mental health resources and Make the Road NJ offered community advocacy.

“We wanted to get the whole community involved,” D'Alessandro said. “When I looked at the playground here at Lafayette, I saw this outdoor area that was so neglected, so unutilized. I hope this project gets people to think how important play is and what an asset a playground is for a school.” 🏡

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