



September-October 2006

Education - Art Appreciation

Art Appreciaion

Lessons in Life from the Junior
Center

by Noelle Robbins



Interactive. Engaging. Inspiring. Oakland teachers would love every classroom experience described in these glowing terms. But public

school teachers face daunting challenges. They are under marching orders to maximize student performance as measured by test results focused on math and language skills. And with tight budgets, teachers must often make penny-wise choices when it comes to creating captivating, lively and, yes, inspiring learning opportunities—particularly when it comes to the arts.

Which is exactly why so many teachers in Oakland schools embrace the programs and workshops offered by the Junior Center of Art and Science.

During the past 50 years the Junior Center, an independent nonprofit organization nestled on the shores of Lake Merritt, has reached out to more than 250 kindergarten through eighth-grade schools in Oakland and 13 other East Bay cities with art and science classes designed to supplement basic curriculums and fill gaps in cash-strapped districts.

The Oakland Junior League launched the center in a bid to boost community morale after World War II, says Executive Director Tammara Katsikas. The center's school outreach workshops and exhibits have supported the efforts of dedicated but financially stretched teachers and enhanced the lives of East Bay school children—about 20,000 as of 2005—ever since.

When a Junior Center instructor enters an Oakland classroom, he brings a world of magic with him. For instance, one series introduces children to artists like Cézanne, Matisse, Monet, O'Keefe

and van Gogh. Kids travel back in time to explore the culture in which each artist lived. They learn the building blocks and techniques, shapes and colors that lay the groundwork for the birth of a masterpiece. They take up brushes. And they paint.

Richard Thompson, a Thornhill Elementary kindergarten teacher, relishes artist Oding Muata's funny, engaging style and how he breaks painting technique down into simple, concrete steps for young students. But more important, Thompson says, is that the classes can "inspire a lifelong love of art and participation in the creative process. It is more than enrichment, but it is hard to measure. There are no standardized assessments of art appreciation."



In addition to school-site art classes, teachers can arrange field trips to the center where one exhibit invites children to immerse themselves in centuries of Native-American tradition by visualizing life in a tule shelter and touching artifacts that are becoming shiny with the caresses of hundreds of children. Students then apply this hands-on familiarity to their history lessons, real-life details vivid in their minds.

Another center exhibit on African-American inventors creates a vital link to more recent history as Sharon Allen, a fourth- and fifth-grade special education teacher at Franklin Elementary, was delighted to discover. Instructing students who are deaf and hard of hearing, Allen was astounded by her students' reaction. The treasure hunt integral to this interactive display thoroughly captured their active imaginations; and diving into the construction of science-based make-it-yourself inventions using recycled materials enthralled her students as well, she says, adding that her experience with the school-site art classes has been equally remarkable.

"I was floored; it was amazing. The students realized increased confidence when they could express themselves with art and painting. It boosts their academic skills and encourages them to take risks." Allen considers the center a "jewel of a resource" that she plans to regularly incorporate in her classroom environment.

It is exactly this kind of teacher and student response that validates Katsikas' belief in the vital service the center provides to East Bay school districts. She notes that the 22 art and science workshops and exhibits stress the use of low-cost and recycled materials-another bonus for teachers who may, depending on allocated PTA funding, dip into their own pockets to provide their students with some of these priceless enrichment opportunities.

Lincoln Principal Caroline Yee is an avid Junior Center fan who actively encourages her teachers to take advantage of available programs. She's convinced nothing comes close to art and science when it comes to "putting the discovery back in learning."

In hundreds of Oakland classrooms, the Junior Center of Art and Science is a precious resource,

busily filling seeking hearts, eager fingers and curious minds with the wonder and power of discovery and creation-all priceless lessons for life.

Get Involved

School outreach exhibits and workshops (\$75 to \$102, including supplies), can be arranged on a first-come, first-served basis through the Junior Center of Art and Science. These popular offerings are usually booked by December. For more information on the workshops, after school classes, summer art and science camps, volunteer programs and special events, contact the Junior Center of Art and Science, 558 Bellevue Ave., (510) 839-5777, www.juniorcenter.org.