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Potter brings special needs art program to Butler County

By JACKSON FRENCH jfrench@bgdailynews.com Jun 14, 2019



MORGANTOWN – For years, Butler County potter Suzanne Renfrow has been working to develop the artistic and social skills of children with disabilities.

This year, after about a decade of operating a winter program in which she works with mentally impaired children at the Kentucky Museum, she’s bringing the program to Butler County.

Renfrow, who mainly works as a potter, is involved with VSA Kentucky’s Side by Side program, which is designed to help children with special needs develop artistic skills. Renfrow said the children she works with enjoy making the artwork and tend to be especially fond of painting.

She also touted the positive effects the attention and instruction has on the children’s development.

“I cannot tell you what a great benefit it is,” she said. “It gives them ... better social skills because they’re out with other people.”

Programs like Side by Side also give parents the chance to network with one another and learn about resources and strategies they might be able to use to help their own children, Renfrow said.

“It’s just really good networking altogether because you meet other people with other disabilities and you can share all of the things that you learn from each other and it helps everyone out,” she said.

Through the workweek, Renfrow hosted the Side by Side program at the Butler County Arts Guild headquarters, 115 W. Ohio St. in Morgantown. For 90 minutes each day, Renfrow met with special-needs children and one young special-needs adult, guiding them through projects that involved painting, drawing and building cardboard figures.

The cardboard figures were designed like totem poles. Painted cardboard in different shapes was attached with hot glue to a cardboard newsprint tube that, when stood up, was about 2 feet tall.

On Thursday, two Side by Side regulars, Ethan Burden, 18, and Alex Daugherty, 10, came to the Arts Guild building.

Burden’s passion for dinosaurs was readily apparent throughout the session, which saw him putting the finishing touches on his “Rainbow T-Rex” totem pole, which used a range of brightly colored cardboard pieces to transform the newsprint tube into a single T-Rex.

When he and Renfrow were finished putting the T-Rex together, Burden shifted focus to painting. At a nearby table, he used a number of colors to realize a “rainbow sauropod.”

Renfrow said that, more than a decade ago, she “went back to Western (Kentucky University) to get a teaching degree” but did not finish the program.

“I have a daughter that was in school. It was just too much,” she said.

Despite that, her passion for teaching did not go unnoticed.

“Through that, I did some teaching. People saw that I love working with kids and I started doing a lot of special classes,” she said.

As a potter, she does a lot of work by herself, which makes the chance to teach children about art a refreshing change of pace.

“It’s isolating working as an artist alone in your own studio, and so I really love working with the kids,” she said.

The main thing to keep in mind when teaching kids with disabilities is the unique needs of each child, Renfrow said.

“I have lots of premade and precut stuff,” she said, gesturing toward a box filled with small pieces of cardboard cut into various shapes. “I do that way ahead of time.”

Though many special-needs children require a lot of direct over-the-shoulder guidance, Renfrow said she has to be aware of students who perform better when supervised less closely.

At noon July 22, an event at the Arts Guild headquarters will recognize the Side by Side participants’ work, Renfrow said.

“They’ll get a little certificate and ... all their work will be hung,” she said.

Renfrow said the Side by Side program has never been offered in Butler County before and that she plans to bring it back next year, hoping that it draws the attention of more parents.

“It’s kind of sad that no one’s brought it here til now, but I’m really really glad to have this happen and I’m glad to be a part of it and I want it to be something that’s established here,” she said.

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