

SB Arts Council launches Arts Now

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With new energy, the Arts Council partners with California Alliance for the Arts to pursue a long-held dream; solidifying a place for the arts in public education



Paine's conference room was full as guests listened to local Mariachi Juvenil performers.



Anzar High School student Carla McEwen recites the poem, "I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings" by Maya Angelou. McEwen will be going on to compete next in the Sacramento Poetry Out Loud competition.



Natasha Blankenship, a ballet dancer with San Benito Dance Academy.



Mariachi Juvenil showcases young singers and musicians.



Lisa Andrew, Hollister School District Superintendent admitted to not having the artistic gene but expressed support for more arts programs.



Wildman, with Hollister School District is convinced an arts education student has a promising future.



Lisa Malzone Morales with Animation Dance Company shares the table's comments with the crowd after the table talks.

The county's arts community has been slowly building steam first with El Teatro Campesino and for more than a decade, through the efforts of the San Benito Arts Council. On Friday, March 23, local art advocates were invited by the Arts Council to hear about "Arts Now", a program aimed at increasing public school arts education. The Arts Council, which is based in Hollister, organized and hosted the breakfast event at Paine's Restaurant.

Amanda Chiado, the Council's Arts Now coordinator, welcomed the packed room of teachers, school administrators, artists and local nonprofits. She explained that the Arts Council is working with California Alliance for Arts Education to reestablish the arts as an essential part of public education and attempt to reach every student.

The two-hour breakfast gathering had music from the Mariachi Juvenil youth group. The program included Anzar High School's recent Poetry Out Loud winner, Carla McEwen reciting her poem selection and San Benito Dance Academy's Natasha Blankenship, who has trained there for six years, performing a few ballet variations. San Benito County Superintendent of Schools, Krystal Lomanto and Hollister School

District Superintendent, Lisa Andrew both spoke in support of putting the arts back into area public schools and the positive role the arts can play in a student's development. Coordinator Chiado, who is also a poet and the Poetry Out Loud teacher, said that what she enjoys about her San Benito Arts Council job is that she loves to engage with students and watch them grow. Through the arts, she said she can watch youth develop and find their individuality.

The Arts Council announced the California Alliance for the Arts as a partner on Arts Now and Robin Hampton with the alliance provided some background and explained its goals. She said Arts Now has the ambition to reach as many students as possible, particularly those who cannot afford private lessons. She said, "Every child in the public school system should have access to a quality education that includes the arts."

Hampton broke down the eight priorities of Arts Now; to convene stakeholders, develop a leadership team, assess the current status, build and cultivate partnerships, leverage resources and come up with a strategic arts plan.

Arts Council Executive Director, Jennifer Laine then brought the goals down to a local level, explaining why public school is the place to make it happen. "We need to have some parity when it comes to the arts. Many students have the means to get lessons privately but many do not. The only place we know we can provide arts with some equity is at public school," she said.

Laine stated that arts education was negatively impacted by the 2008 economic downturn. She said that the logical place to build an arts education is in all the public schools and that it should occur during the school day when "everyone is there".

In closing, Laine told the audience, "We can't let the enormity of our challenges cause inaction."

Jennifer Wildman, Hollister School District's recently hired assistant superintendent, recently moved to the area from Santa Cruz. She said when she was considering the job she came east to get a feel for the community. "I asked myself, 'Can I live in a place that has no ocean?'" She admitted that frankly, she wasn't sure, but driving around she found the small restaurants, familiar grocery stores and other aspects of Hollister area reassuring.

She said she drove around town and started to warm up to the idea. But when she came around a corner in downtown Hollister and saw a San Benito Arts Council sign, her spirits were lifted.

"They have an Arts Council. We can live here!" she had announced with new confidence. "An arts council makes a town vibrant," she explained to the breakfast crowd.

Wildman encouraged the guests to believe in the ultimate value of an arts education. "Practical, repetitive jobs are going to computers and technology. Creativity comes from the heart," she said. Wildman reminded everyone that to create is a human characteristic and that it is not so easily replaced.

Throughout the morning, many personal stories were shared about young students who had found confidence and attained personal growth through a positive creative experience.

Each table was asked to point out their view of what an arts education can bring to not just a student, but to the whole community. Then guests expressed their thoughts on arts education after the breakout session. The benefits were voiced from table to table around the room.

“In the arts you learn perseverance and the creative process helps you become more open minded.”

“Art helps improve learning in all subjects.”

“It is a way of expression without strict boundaries or requiring only one answer like math or a true or false quiz.”

“The arts help you get out of your box and you learn it is okay to be a little bit weird.”

“It can be a way to learn for a student who doesn’t learn in standardized ways.”

It was clear the sizable group was already aware of the many attributes of an education incorporating art, but the challenge remains in San Benito County to reestablish it as an essential part of the school week. The breakfast ended with a request by Arts Now coordinator Amanda Chiado, reminding guests that leaders and volunteers are needed and asked them to get involved in Arts Now.

Guests had been reminded of young students who developed personally through a part in a play, learning a musical instrument or creating an art project. As the program ended, many sat visiting, nodding and some remembering being one of those students themselves. Robin Hampton with the California Alliance for the Arts had said it earlier, “It only takes a little to make a lot happen.”