

Times-Standard
GUEST OPINION

Help kids discover art with the Humboldt Docent Council

Frances G. Beatty/My Word

We're in a quandary. The arts -- performing and visual -- are being removed from primary and secondary education. It's happening not just because of budget cuts. The value of arts education has been reduced to a dreamy notion instead of being central to fulfilling our human potential. For the pragmatists, there is plenty of evidence for art's importance. Did you know that learning to draw in your youth could help prepare you for these careers: a pilot, landscape architect, engineer, geographer, medical illustrator, product designer, or graphic designer? These all need spatial comprehension; they diagram and draw their ideas. Music and theater develop yet other parts of our brains, not to mention their performances require discipline and teamwork. Research has shown that the arts within the curriculum enhance the academic performance in all subjects. If our immediate future needs more innovative people in all professions, trades, and roles in society, then we need to get serious about engaging young people with art -- consistently.

Thankfully, some remedies are already being launched. There are statewide and local initiatives to advocate for art education and disseminate the research on the impact of arts in education. In 2011, California began CREATE CA, a collaboration between the state's Department of Education and Arts Council, to draft a new policy document to transform our schools. It features arts education as a central part of the solution. On the advocacy front, the California Alliance for Arts Education (CAAE) champions this view: "Arts education helps prepare our students for the expectations of the 21st century workforce, which includes the ability to innovate, communicate and collaborate." They have spearheaded a Local Arts Advocacy Networks project and have selected the Humboldt Alliance for Arts Education as a participating partner.

Part of the solution is already happening in local classrooms. Humboldt Docent Council members reach school children throughout the academic year by conducting art appreciation presentations in the visual arts. Since 1975, this group of dedicated community members have taken art to schools on topics that range from individual artists, elements of art, and modern art, to prehistoric cave art, masks, and African-American and Latin American art. In 2012, the docents reached over 970 school children through museum tours and individual classroom presentations. Through the Art Bank program, where original works of art are displayed at sponsoring schools, docents engaged over 3,000 students in discovering art. Homeroom teachers have stated their appreciation loud and clear: "The Pacific Rim program was the best presentation on art for kindergarten kids I have ever seen." A teacher in Fortuna declared, "Lucy's use of Spanish really added a special touch to her presentation. It drew all the students into the presentation, especially the Hispanic students."

What can you do? Join the Humboldt Docent Council! As guides at the Morris Graves Museum of Art and art ambassadors in the schools, we need more dedicated volunteers who truly enjoy art and working with students. Unfortunately, we cannot serve every teacher in the county who asks for our help. However, with more docents we can have a wider program that serves more communities -- more students! There is no need to worry that you're not an expert on art, because we'll train and mentor you. We introduce strategies from expert teachers to keep the students' attention and tailor art presentations for young people. One docent reflected, "At first I was worried about presenting to the little ones, but after watching a few of my mentors engage them seamlessly, I dove right in. Over the years I have adopted many mentors' ideas into my presentations."

To join, start by giving the Humboldt Arts Council a call at 442-0278 or just come to one of our monthly meetings. They're the first Friday of the month at 10:30 a.m. (coffee social at 10 a.m.), from September to June at the Morris Graves Museum of Art. Your time commitment is up to you. We have monthly art talks to acquaint us with the museum's exhibits and nationally known local artists. School visits can take as little as a couple of hours to ten hours a month. Museum tours take less than an hour each.

The docents' rewards are many. Being a part of students' enthusiastic response to art and watching their art knowledge grow over the years motivates us. We are inspired when we see children express their awe of the Morris Graves Museum and the art exhibits. We feel our contribution when we witness the expansion and enrichment of young lives with art. Join us and make a difference!

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