Arts Now working with districts to spark students’ creativity

By: JOHANNA MILLER  📅 March 13, 2020

WATSONVILLE – As lunchtime drew to a close Wednesday, fourth- and fifth-grade students at Starlight Elementary School began to gradually filter into the classroom of art teacher Meredith Branan Freeman.

They were there to learn about stop-motion animation and create their own movies. Some students worked individually, while others collaborated in small groups on their projects.
“It's really a hands-on experience for them,” Freeman said. “Something that they can be proud of, to share with their fellow students... and with their community."

Last week the California Alliance for Arts Education kicked off its Arts Now campaign in the Pajaro Valley. The campaign is a three-year grant program, which community leaders — usually from arts councils and nonprofit organizations — can apply for. The program aims to promote and implement art in public schools, especially classes like Freeman's, which occur during regular school hours.

“That is when it becomes equitable,” said Arts Now Coordinator Robin Hampton. “Not everyone has the time or money to send their kids to special after-school programs. It has to be integrated into regular school hours.”

The Santa Cruz County faction of the California Alliance for Arts Education has been working with local districts and organizations since 2012, after arts programs continued being cut from schools. Two years ago, the Alliance realized the importance of focusing on each district individually. Plans were set in motion to find leaders to head the different regions.

Three separate districts have now launched their own Arts Now communities in Santa Cruz County: San Lorenzo Valley, Live Oak and Pajaro Valley (PVUSD).

“What the PVUSD needs is very different from what Scotts Valley or Live Oak needs,” Sue Graulty, visual and performing arts coordinator for PVUSD, said. “I think it is a great idea breaking it down to specific areas.”

Arts Now coordinates through organizations and community councils — not directly through school districts. In Watsonville, Judy Stabile of Pajaro Valley Arts will be working as an Arts Now leader. Stabile said it made sense for PV Arts to be the liaison, as they already work closely with the district on field trips and school art shows.

“We will be focusing on what the needs of PVUSD are, and how to help them,” Stabile said. “All students deserve to have an arts education — regardless of language or what school they go to. Our job is to provide equitable opportunities.”

The Arts Now program invites teachers, parents, organizations and other community members to get involved and share their own ideas on how to implement arts education into the PVUSD curriculum.

“With any category of the arts, there's a core set of things that kids will take away,” Stabile said. “It teaches skills they won't get in any other subject... color theory, perspective, the ability to adapt. Creative thinking is a professional skill that people need. We have to start looking at the arts as more than just sitting down and painting a picture.”

Hampton said she knows firsthand the power of arts education.

“My son was bullied through middle school, but he found his voice through music,” she said. “He wouldn't even stand up for a presentation in class, but he was always excited for band. It empowered him and gave him confidence.”

Campaigns like Arts Now are imperative, Graulty said, because there is strength in numbers.

“You are always stronger when you have a coalition of people working together for one goal,” Graulty said. “To have that behind us, supporting us, is great.”

Hampton added that Santa Cruz County has already made tremendous strides in promoting arts education in its schools. She praised both County Superintendent Dr. Faris Sabrah and PVUSD Superintendent Dr. Michelle Rodriguez for their continued support.

“There is magic happening in [Santa Cruz County],” Hampton said. “So many things are coming together, and we are thrilled to be part of it. PVUSD is going to be a model for many other districts.”
For information about Arts Now go to artsed411.org/artsnow. To learn how to get involved with Pajaro Valley Arts Now visit pvarts.org.

JOHANNA MILLER

REPORTER JOHANNA MILLER GREW UP IN WATSONVILLE, ATTENDING LOCAL PUBLIC SCHOOLS AND CABRILLO COLLEGE BEFORE TRANSFERRING TO PACIFIC UNIVERSITY OREGON TO STUDY ENGLISH AND MEDIA. SHE COVERS THE ARTS, BUSINESS AND AGRICULTURE.

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