

## Award-winning art program lauded for engaging students

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MATTHEW GUERRY | Monday, July 3, 2017, 11:00 p.m.

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During this class, students began by sharing things they do to calm or comfort themselves when upset, angry or sad. Then they explored their own interpretation of Martin Luther King's "I Have a Dream" speech by using pastel dye sticks to design a "Dream Pillow." Some used images and colors to comfort themselves, but many chose to make their pillows as gifts for a family member.

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Susan Novak and the dozen or so children she had been teaching after school for the past few weeks sought to make a solar system out of a Jeannette McKee Elementary School classroom. She stood at the center of the room, holding a large paper lantern that was to be their sun.

The kids circled around her, each clutching a paper lantern that they painted to be the planets.

It wasn't your typical art class.

"We're in an art space," Novak, 55, of Johnstown once told the kids, "not an art class."

Novak, who holds a master's degree in community counseling and is certified for art therapy, has now taught students at several different schools through programs developed by Art Expression Inc., a Mt. Lebanon-based nonprofit organization founded by Angela and James

Lowden. Programs have been offered in school districts throughout Allegheny, Westmoreland and other counties since 2002.

For the second time since 2013, Art Expression is a finalist in the National Arts and Humanities Youth Program Award by the President's Committee on the National Arts and Humanities, the Institute of Museum and Library Services, the National Endowment for the Arts and the National Endowment for the Humanities. Nomination recognizes the group as one of the top 50 organizations of its kind in the country, and victory ensures a grant of \$10,000.

The organization partners with school districts and homeless shelters. Its programs are notable for including elements of art therapy, with many led by professionals in the field.

"We certainly have art therapists that are board certified and are registered," said Angela Lowden, 69, but "because we don't do clinical art therapy, it's not a requirement."

Teachers at schools partnered with the organization typically invite about 15 children to attend the classes, which are offered a few weeks each semester. Art Expression offers different programs for various grade levels and provides the materials.

The group previously worked with Greensburg Salem School District and worked with Jeannette this past year to offer classes to elementary and high school students. Cooperation doesn't always come easy to younger students, especially early on.

At Jeannette, the moment Novak felt her lessons clicked came during a class when she instructed students to evenly divide stuffing for pillows they were decorating.

"We had leftover (stuffing) that day," Novak said.

Sharonda Stewart joked that her 7-year-old daughter, Yazmine, was likely one of the children who misbehaved early on. Yazmine already attended Jeannette's own after-school program and expressed an interest in art, which is why Stewart gave her permission to attend.

"It keeps a lot of the children out of trouble ... even though they're only out of second grade," said Stewart, 29, of Jeannette. "It keeps them around a more positive environment."

Lowden said programs are aimed in part at communities of lower socioeconomic status. Her belief in the healing power of art is personal, as she was orphaned at a young age.

"When a child suffers a trauma, they carry that through life. And that child needs to be helped," she said. "(Art) gave me order. It helped me to be calm. It helped me to be hopeful. It helped me to have confidence, and to look to the future and be grateful for what I did have."

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