

## Art therapy breaks down barriers at Trinity North

Scott Beveridge May 18, 2019



Scott Beveridge/Observer-Reporter

Trinity North Elementary School students, from left, Nolan Shimenkel, Joshua Harshall and John Kengar participate Thursday in an after-school art program.

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An energetic group of children spilled Thursday into a classroom in Trinity Area School District, about to undergo a two-hour after-school art therapy session.

A teacher then leads the second- and third-graders in a hand-clapping exercise designed to calm and quiet them before they begin a lesson drawn from a Buddhist colony in France.

"They use their art to vent," Trinity Area art teacher Jordan Merchant said. "It gives the kids more

of an outlet to be creative.”

There is a waiting list of children who want to be enrolled in this program, said Angela M. Lowden, founder of the nonprofit organization that runs the classes.

She also is president of the federally recognized Art Expression Inc. of Pittsburgh, which conducts programming for underserved populations in Washington and Greene counties.

It received a \$10,000 grant from the National Endowment for the Arts to support the programs this term in the Trinity Area, Charleroi Area and Central Greene school districts.

The districts’ schoolteachers and guidance counselors recommend students for these two-hour sessions, selecting kids who may need help socializing, have a behavioral problem or have a disability such as an autistic disorder. Some of these kids are selected because they enjoy art.

“We teach them how to make art, not so much to hang on a wall, but as an expression of self,” said Cheryl Silinskas, an art facilitator who led Thursday’s class at Trinity North Elementary School in Canton Township.

“We level the playing field,” Lowden added.

“The kids and their parents are very positive,” she said. “We see an increase in confidence, communication and problem-solving.”

The lesson Thursday began with the children selecting words that might describe them, including brave, respectful and dramatic. Later they were given boxes with items in them to select for their collages.

The children also were given colorful pebbles to hold as another way to calm them.

Art Expression also is a way to provide more opportunities for creative expression at public schools that have made cuts to art programs, Lowden said.

Here at Trinity, the elementary students have just one art class a week that lasts for 40 minutes and involves an introduction to a project and 10 minutes of clean-up time, Merchant said.

“Art is a vehicle to improve their social skills,” he said.

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Scott Beveridge is a North Charleroi native who has lived most of his life in nearby Rostraver Township. He is a general assignments reporter focusing on investigative journalism and writing stories about the mid-Mon Valley.

