



Celebrating



#1 Emerson Elementary School: Abstract Painting Project by Bob Kann

"You can't tell where one person started and one person ended. We all are together on this piece of canvass, and the only way we can do this is together."

~Sue Loesl, Adaptive Art Specialist, Emerson School

Tom Kiebzak is a visual artist who wanted to bring abstract art into a school setting to show students that there's more to art than just drawing. Teri Sullivan, informed by Arts @ Large's work with Jennifer Ondrejka and the Wisconsin Board for People with Developmental Disabilities, wanted to expand A@L's initiatives to create programs that engaged students of all learning and physical abilities. Tom and Teri had a long history of successful collaborations after twenty-five years of marital bliss (usually, LOL) including parenting future A@L CEO Sean Kiebzak. The lovebirds enlisted the assistance of Milwaukee Public Schools Adaptive Arts Specialist, Sue Loesl, and the principal of Emerson Elementary School, Rose Carr, who later agreed to host what became a one-day, all-inclusive art project. Susan Borri, a Multimedia Artist, was later added to the project team.

The ambitious plan was for the entire school of students, teachers, administrators, and staff to paint 8 six-by-six-foot canvases in one school day. Throughout the day, students of all abilities would work together to design Jackson Pollock-like canvases. Tom and Sue's philosophy that "there are no rules and there is no right or wrong in abstract painting" would help ensure success for the students. Acrylic paint on canvas was also a perfect medium for a painting involving hundreds of students because, as Sue explained, "it dries quickly, which is important when you're creating layers of color - it leaves a nice texture."



Planning for the day was complex and formidable. Neither Sue nor Tom had ever been involved in a project of this magnitude with students. Sue gathered all of the requisite adaptive art tools for the project, found additional aids online, and would ad lib as needs arose during the day.

There would be students in wheelchairs who would need to have accommodations and equipment they could use from their wheelchairs. There would be students whose anxieties would have to be addressed because their regular school routines would be disrupted during a day when the school would be turned upside down. In advance, all students would need to be familiarized with the art tools which would be available during the day of painting so that they'd be ready to get to work in the tightly scheduled painting day. The plan was formulated in a way to capitalize on the strengths and skills students' possessed.

Sue gave Tom a lesson on using many of the adaptive painting tools so that he would be better able to assist the students using devices such as four-to-six-foot paint extenders, adaptive paint brushes, textured paintbrush bristles that could make ten lines with one stroke, and other equipment, with which he was unfamiliar.

Sue and Tom visited each classroom before the big event took place to give them a road map for how the abstract painting day would unfold and to let them handle some of the painting tools they'd subsequently use. The students with disabilities were already familiar with many of the adaptive art tools from having worked previously with "Miss Sue," and they were particularly excited about trying some new tools she showed them. All students received a painter's hat which they painted themselves and wore during the painting extravaganza. Why the hats? Because they wanted the students to genuinely feel like they were artists. The hats would help in this transformation. The hats also gave each student a takeaway from the day in lieu of not being able to bring home a six-by-six-foot canvas.

At the time, Sue was also teaching part time at Mount Mary University. She enlisted the aid of several of her art therapy and adaptive art students to provide additional assistance during the painting day and to give them a hands-on opportunity working with students presenting different kinds of challenges. Occupational and physical therapists joined in the festivities to lend their assistance to students.

The paint-a-thon took place in the school gymnasium. Older students helped protect the floors by covering them with newspapers. To ensure that all students had access to the canvases, four canvases were set up vertically on the stage and four were laid horizontally on the floor.



Two hundred and twenty-eight students and forty faculty members rotated through the gymnasium over the course of the day. When the students arrived at the gym, they were “smocked up,” given rubber gloves, and were ready to go. They used paint brushes, roller paints, dabbed sponges, threw sponges at the canvases, and painted with their fingers. Sue’s nephew donated two catapults which students loaded with painted sponges and tennis balls they would fling at the canvases. Some of the students who were in wheelchairs coated their wheels with paint and drove over the flat canvases to leave their artistic imprints. Other students crawled on the ground and painted on the canvases. Although “dressed to the nines” and wearing high heels, principal Rose Carr “smocked up” and took her turn painting, too.

One of the most important rules that was impressed upon the students in the pre-painting meeting with Sue and Tom was that they could not blot out another artist’s work. Amazingly, they respectfully followed this rule. In fact, there was an unexpected sense of awe that permeated the gymnasium. Once students entered the painting arena and finished squealing with excitement, an atmosphere of quiet concentration and focused painting ensued and continued throughout the day. Under Susan Borri’s direction, several students used GoPro cameras to videotape the event.

There were many beautiful and magical moments observed by the adults in attendance. Teri Sullivan described one such incident,

"There was a young student I saw when I walked into the room. Another student couldn't pick up the paintbrush, so the student next to her picked up the paintbrush, put it in the other student's hands, held her hands, and they painted it together. And for me that was like the ultimate of what we {A@L} were trying to achieve, that students helped one another, but didn't do it because they had to. They did it because it was like, Oh, let's just do this together because you can't pick this up, but I can."

Sue Loesl told this story:

"The catapult was funny. I remember this one student was in a wheelchair and couldn't bend over to release it. The previous day, we had done a couple of other things to prepare for students in wheelchairs to make it easier for them to trigger the catapult. We had a stick that we gave the students with the chairs that they popped out or they could hold vertically and then pop down to trigger the release. So, I was working on a different canvas away from a student who was struggling to trigger the catapult with the stick.

My role is to help adapt, and so I was looking from my canvas over to the one where one of the kids was trying to help the student in the wheelchair do it {trigger it}. Not that they did it for them. They were trying to figure out how to help them do it. I had to hold myself back from going over and intervening because we had solved it our own way. This student had figured out how to use the stick to help push that thing down and let the students in the wheelchairs do it themselves."

At the end of the day, groups of students were allowed to re-enter the gymnasium and view the 8 canvases now hung vertically on the stage, creating a kind of gallery. It was stunning. The students were so proud of their creations. Several pointed out where they had personally painted on the canvases. A different sense of awe from the day's atmosphere in the gymnasium developed as students marveled at the large and beautiful abstract paintings they had collectively created. For children accustomed to painting or drawing on a piece of paper or canvas that was usually 12 x 18 inches, seeing these giant canvases covering the stage was wondrous.

Students understood and respected the format of abstract painting. Sue commented that nobody attempted to paint concrete objects such as kittens or trees nor did anyone try to inscribe their own name on the canvas. They respected the process and one another's work.

Selected canvases from the project were subsequently proudly displayed in the atrium of Milwaukee's Betty Brinn Children's Museum. Several months later, Tom Kiebzak, Sue Loesl, and students shared their experience with the attendees at Arts Day at the Monona Terrace Convention Center in Madison. They then took a tour of the State Capital where Lieutenant Governor Barbara Lawton invited the entire group into her office. Students interviewed her about the importance of the arts. She said, "The arts help you see things you might not otherwise see and think of things in a creative way."

Sue Loesl summarized her feelings about the day.

"I had been doing this for many years, and this was magical. I mean I think it changed me in that something of this magnitude was so awesome. I tend to be pretty emotional anyway, but I cried a lot during the day. There were moments when I'd step back and look at the process of what was going on. I let myself stop and be in the moment of working with the kids and observing and just emotionally being there. It was awesome. It was just incredible and very moving. It's one of my favorite experiences in MPS."



About the Author

Bob Kann grew up in Skokie, Illinois, but it happened so long ago that he remembers nothing of the event.

As a child, he loved sports above all else and could perform a standing back flip by the age of nine. His mother worried that reading nothing but sports books would stunt Bob's intellectual growth, but his older brother assured her that he would eventually read books on other topics (he did). Little did any of them know that he also would write several books including a book about a baseball player and another about an athlete who competed in several sports. Listening to his father's tales about growing up during the Depression, driving at the age of twelve to make deliveries for his father's store, and other stories of the south side of Chicago planted the seeds for Bob's later passion for storytelling.

Bob attended the University of Wisconsin-Madison, became a teacher, received his Ph.D. in Curriculum and Instruction from the University of Wisconsin-Madison, and later a Professor of Education at UW-Parkside and UW-Stevens Point. Shortly after becoming a professor, Bob realized he liked making his students laugh more than he liked teaching them. He recognized that what he wanted to next undertake was simultaneously entertaining children and adults since this seemed limitlessly interesting and creative.

In 1982, Bob became a storyteller, juggler, and magician who began performing for children and families throughout the United States. In 1985, he realized that being a former teacher/professor turned entertainer, he had unique insights into the relationship between entertainment and education. Hence, he began teaching graduate classes and presenting keynotes and workshops for educators and nonprofit organizations on topics related to humor, storytelling, creativity, and motivation. (Coincidentally, A@L CEO Emeritus contracted with Bob to perform at the PumpHouse Regional Arts Center in LaCrosse, WI at the beginning of his career. Bob continued providing great educational programming at various organizations where Sullivan worked and subsequently was one of the first artists to work with Arts @ Large in 2001.)

As a free-lancer for more than thirty years, Bob has developed many interests which have led him to produce storytelling tapes and write books for children, design curriculum for teachers, collect and write historical stories for nonprofit organizations, and apply his research skills as a consultant for social service agencies.

Bob believes it's easier to climb the ladder of success when it's lying flat on the ground. He usually can be found reading his favorite book on levitation. He simply can't put it down.