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Artistic expressions

By: Ansel Oliver, The Press-Tribune

Eight-year-old Katie Koepke kept thinking she was messing up her picture in an after-school art class. While it may not have developed the way she hoped, her instructor insisted this wasn't the case.

"You can still do something with this," her instructor, Melissa Perry said.

"I messed up again," said Katie.

"No you didn't, that's OK," said her instructor.

The after school art class is a local franchise of the national chain KidzArt, a well reviewed business in Entrepreneur Magazine that teaches in a noncompetitive environment.

Co-owners Gayle Guest-Brown and her husband Ernest run their home-based franchise delivering classes to some 15 area schools. Instructors for KidzArt arrive at schools in Roseville, Rocklin and surrounding areas to provide art instruction during the after-school program. The couple started the business last November, saying it complemented their own values.

"It's an art program but it's also a confidence-building program and a creativity-building program," said Guest-Brown. "And our philosophy in the classroom is that there are no mistakes."

No erasers, the kids use permanent-marking tools. If they make a mistake they have to work it into their picture and make something out of it. Guest-Brown said that's what builds creativity.



paul maska/THE PRESS-TRIBUNE Students Paula Nguyen, left, and Kaitlyn LoBue, right, take an art lesson from KidzArt instructor Melissa Perry, Wednesday.

"It's an important life skill too, because when we make mistakes at life we don't always get to do over," she said. "We just have to make do with what we have and make something good come out of that situation."

School administrators find KidzArt complements their own school curriculum. While some elementary teachers incorporate art into some subjects, most teachers don't have a background in art technique, said Jodi Westphal, principal at Spanger Elementary School in Roseville.

"It's nice to be able to offer an after-school program," Westphal said. "Children are getting experience with different art mediums which is really nice because schools don't often have the potential to do that."

Matt Murphy, principal of Antelope Creek Elementary School in Rocklin, said he wants as many after-school opportunities for kids as possible. Even though the district offers art classes, KidzArt classes were full and attendance never dropped, he said.

"The more kids are connected to school, the better the chance that we're going to help them academically, because they like school," Murphy said.

Making the picture your own

Instructor Perry told a recent class of seven students they were going to do a contour exercise - drawing their neighbor's face without looking at their paper. All seven dropped their mouths and some gasped as if they had been asked to climb a mountain.

They started, smiling and giggling at first. "Uh," muttered a girl in the midst of her challenge.

"It's OK," Perry told the student. "Just do your best, try not to look at your paper." A minute later she gave a 10-second countdown to the end of the activity.

Perry then asked the kids to look around the classroom to find an example of a straight line then a curved line. She put up a drawing of three silly-looking frogs and repeated the same questions for the picture.

The kids paused for a moment of relaxation to imagine what their own three frogs would look like on their paper.

"Can we do one frog?" Katie asked.

Of course.

"Art is more subjective. It's not perfect," said Guest-Brown. "It's not a rendering program where all the kids' pictures look the same."

She said the kids can do anything with two lines: straight and curved.

"We take what might look like a complex picture and break it down into lines and shapes, and teach them to draw that way, and then use their creativity to color it in," she said.

While students fill the rest of their picture with color, an instructor plays soft classical piano music from a stereo.

Kids learn basic art terms like "shadowing" and "perspective" while using a multitude of mediums - chalk pastels, oil pastels, and high quality Prismacolor markers. Most instructors have art degrees and say they didn't get to use such products until college.

"We want the kids to have those kinds of products," said Ernest Brown. "It's not just for the refrigerator. This is for the wall."

"We want them to feel confident in their art," said his wife Gayle.

With all the acceptance of mistakes in the curriculum, is she worried that she's sending the message that anything kids do in life is OK?

"No, because they are other subjects where that message gets through," she said. "In math, there's always a right answer, with science you have to provide the right answer."

Guest-Brown said a mother recently told her that her daughter had a bad day in sports, but she was in KidzArt, which helped her confidence. She's bringing home great things - expressions of herself.

"There's no competition in art," said Guest-Brown. "It's a good balance to a very media rich and competitive world."

There are usually more girls in classes than boys. The core audience is kindergarten through sixth grade. The standard rate is \$15 per one-hour session. There's no homework for the weekly session, as the kids typically finish a project in class.

Katie, wearing a look of slight concern, showed her pictures to her mother, Erin, at the end of her second class. Her mom offered nothing but praise.

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