



Hemi's fur provided the yarn for the dreamcatchers.

HABIT

One dog, some kids and a dream (catcher)

By Karen Earith

HABIT (Human-Animal Bond in Tennessee), a program run by the University of Tennessee College of Veterinary Medicine, sponsors programs that foster pet visitation to nursing homes, assisted-living residences, retirement centers, mental health centers, residences for children with special needs, rehabilitation facilities, hospital settings and schools.

Established in 1986, HABIT screens its animals medically and behaviorally and trains their volunteer owners regarding pet visitations. Hemi, a 175-lb Great Pyrenees, works with 8th graders in the Ruff Reader Program at Carter Middle School in Knoxville. He belongs to Carter Middle School assistant principal Susan Hutsell.

Every Friday, Hemi patiently sits and listens to 8th graders practice their reading. The students also take turns lovingly brushing his long, white fur. The fur was collected and sent out to be spun into yarn. I worked with the students for a week to create dreamcatchers using the fur yarn. Students each created a small dreamcatcher for themselves and worked together to create a large one to be auctioned off to help support HABIT programs.

Since this was a literacy-based program,

I started each day by reading a different dreamcatcher legend and discussing it. On the first day, students wrapped yarn around a 7-inch long metal ring, completely covering it. The second day they were provided with a pattern and taught the half-hitch knot to create the web. Students who mastered the technique were paired up with classmates who needed further instruction. Teaching others helped reinforce the learned skill.

On the third day, students created dog-themed beads with polymer clay. They used molds, cookie cutters and clay extruders. The next day the students added fringe to their dreamcatchers.

Very little instruction was given, and the students were encouraged to create their own designs. Some of the kids initially did not like the lack of structure and started copying their classmates; but by the end of the class, each was happily going his own way. It was fun to watch them decide how much fringe, length of fringe and location of fringe. On the last day, students added the beads they had made on day three. They used a hand drill to add holes to the beads as needed.

A dreamcatcher completed in the HABIT program.

Beads were strung onto the yarn fringe using a dental floss threader and secured in place with an overhand knot.

I encouraged neatness throughout the project and taught the students design terms like variegated, balance, scale, symmetry and asymmetry. They also learned various knots and Native American folklore. IEP goals included listening, increasing patience, following directions, problem solving, increasing attention span and attempting a novel task.

While working on the group project, students were required to state their design ideas and respectfully critique the ideas presented by others. The students stated they enjoyed the experience of making the dreamcatchers. ■

For more information:

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Karen Earith, OTR/L, brings art into special ed classrooms across Tennessee as an artist-in-residence. These projects are designed to support and enhance specific academic lessons identified by the teacher. Karen also presents lectures on using art successfully in special education. She can be reached at BaileyFiberArt@aol.com.

