

# The Critter Project

A special education artist-in-residency

By Bailey Earith

I had the pleasure of working with Amy Broady, art teacher, and Rhonda Gritz, special education teacher, on a 10-day artist-in-residency. The class was made up of seven third- through fifth-graders with a range of disabilities that included mental retardation, autism, Down syndrome and MR with autism.

The idea for the project came from an article I saw in the Sept./Oct. 2008 edition of *Fiber Arts* magazine. The article discussed how a group of fiber artists made funny stuffed critters for adults. We enjoyed the organic nature of these critters and felt our students could be successful in a similar project.

Our goal was to have the students design and make their own stuffed critters. They would create patterns, choose fabrics and sew, stuff and embellish them. The students also would create special critter boxes/houses in which to store their critters and a companion book complete with photos sequencing the project as well as a story about the critter.

## Goals

This project addressed IEP areas of attention span, following directions, visualizing a long-term project, decision-making, verbal communication, willingness to try something new, patience and tactile defensiveness. We were also able to work on academic skills like reading, writing, concept development, higher-order thinking, problem solving and sequencing. Art goals included terminology (symmetry/asymmetry, organic/geometric), tracing and experience with various art media.

## Sequence

- > **Day 1:** We introduced the project to the students by showing them the magazine article. Students got the opportunity to explore the concepts of symmetry, asymmetry, organic and geometric by sorting various die-cut shapes. Students then drew the shapes of their critters onto freezer wrap. (Freezer wrap is wonderful to use for patterns. It is sturdy. You can draw on the paper side and the shiny side will temporarily adhere to another surface when ironed.) Some of the older students developed color ideas by coloring in their patterns with colored pencils.
- > **Day 2:** Students cut out their freezer-wrap patterns. They each got an opportunity to choose which fabrics they wanted to use from a wide selection of colors and textures. Students were taught iron safety, then proceeded to iron their patterns to the fabrics. Students chose from a selection of yarns and then made cords from the yarns by spinning them with a power drill.
- > **Day 3:** Students decided where they wanted their cord "limbs" positioned. They then took turns sewing their critters on the sewing



## RICO'S STORY

**M**y critter looks like a person. He has long arms and legs. His name is Rico. He is 13 years old. His birthday is January 28. He lives in Mexico and sleeps in his room. Rico barks like a dog. Rico eats tacos, enchiladas and quesadea [sic] at a restaurant. He likes to go to the movies to see sad movies. Rico likes to dance and play baseball and basketball. His favorite color is green. He likes to drink water and eat cheese pizza. His favorite books are chapter books. His favorite friend is Rookie. He also gets a lot of sleep and is really awesome.

- machine. Critters were then turned right-side out and stuffed.
- > **Day 4:** Students worked with polymer clay to create embellishments for their critters.
  - > **Day 5:** Students embellished their critters using their clay pieces as well as assorted ribbons, laces and other found objects.
  - > **Days 6 and 7:** Students decoupedaged papier-mâché boxes with colored tissue paper. A photo of each critter was attached to the lid of its box.
  - > **Day 8:** Students came up with a list of interview questions about their critters as a group.
  - > **Day 9:** Students wrote stories about their critters by answering the interview questions.
  - > **Day 10:** Each student was provided with the typeset story, along with photos taken during the project. Students sequenced their photos and made them into books. The students took turns reading their stories to classroom visitors. ■

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