

Pillars of Character

By Karen Bailey Earith

What happens when you invite 13 third, fourth and fifth graders with disabilities to participate in an art project? A lot of fun, lots of learning and a stunning quilt!

I presented a weeklong artist-in-residency at Farragut Intermediate School in Farragut, TN, from Nov. 29 – Dec. 3, 2004. Students in Ms. Susan Cobb's comprehensive development classroom (CDC) created a quilt depicting the six pillars of character—trustworthiness, respect, responsibility, fairness, caring and citizenship—in order to re-enforce a semester-long classroom discussion on the topics.

The students participated in every aspect of making the quilt. On day one they measured and cut the fabric. (Freezer paper was adhered to the back of the fabric to make it easier to handle.) On the second day the students drew pictures with permanent fabric markers represent-

ing the various character traits. By day three the pillars were labeled and the sewing began. Students were given the opportunity to operate the sewing machine and the iron. On day four the quilt top was completed and basted. The project was completed on day five when the students tied the quilt and embellished it with found objects. The finished quilt will be hung in the main hall of the school for the enjoyment of all the students and staff.

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The children's diagnoses included CP, visual impairment and autism. IEP goals for this project were varied and included motor skills development such as fine-motor coordination, writing, drawing, tying knots, and the use of scissors. Cognitive skills included following directions, retaining information, and working on math, reading, spelling, communication and attention span. Emotional skills included patience, pride, sharing, turn taking, dealing with schedule changes, and trying a novel activity.

Mrs. Cobb expanded the scope of the project by having her students present the quilt over the school's close-circuit TV. They also wrote and illustrated a group report about their experience. The residency was sponsored through a grant by the VSA Foundation, which provides accessible art opportunities to students with disabilities. There was also local support from two quilt shops and a quilting guild for this project. ■

Karen Bailey Earith, OTR/L, a nationally known fiber artist, has been teaching people with disabilities how to create art since becoming an OT in 1983. Earith teaches frequently throughout the year and has been published extensively in magazines and books. She can be reached at AccessDsgnOT@aol.com.

Top: A student sews on the quilt with help from Karen Earith. Middle: The students pose in front of the finished quilt. Bottom: A student proudly signs the quilt.



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