Hearts out for art education

by Suzanne Beuster

A colorful parade of handmade hearts brightening store windows will wind its way along Charles Street on June 7 to help raise awareness for the value and need for arts education in underserved schools in the Boston Public School system.

This outreach to the community is being coordinated by the Art Resource Collaborative for Kids (ARCK), a two-year old nonprofit that has stepped up to add the arts back into the public school classrooms.

Beacon Hillers of all ages are invited to ‘A HeART for Art’, a community get-together taking place near the sandwich shop on the Boston Common between 1-5 p.m. on June 7. Kids and adults can fill up on Ben and Jerry’s ice cream while decorating paper hearts with a fun variety of art materials. When finished, parents and kids may take their hearts with them or donate them to ARCK for display in Charles Street store windows. Using the #followmyheart hashtag, families can tweet @ARCKBOSTON to follow where their hearts go.

Businesses, too, can jump onboard by tweeting or tagging other businesses, asking them to display handmade hearts as well. Several have already offered to donate part of their day’s revenues for art education and one nonprofit will sell homemade heart-shaped cookies to raise funds so that ARCK can bring its arts programs to more and more school classrooms.

“We want Boston to be a city rich in arts and culture, but if our BPS students have little access to arts education, how can we expect Boston to be truly-world class?” asked Sara Maish Demeter, the founder and volunteer executive director of ARCK.

An artist who came to Boston from Jordan more than 20 years ago, Demeter paints messages of love and peace through her modern interpretations of Arabic calligraphy and culture in her works. She is driven by both her passion for art and her concern that the educational system in this richly diverse city fails to adequately address the gaps and misconceptions about its students’ various cultures.

So, two years ago when her first child Sebastian stepped into kindergarten at the Josiah Quincy Elementary School on Washington Street, she was dismayed to discover that the BPS did not have enough funds to hire art teachers for its schools. It was then that she decided to do something about it.

She rallied other parents and organized a series of art workshops called ‘Diversity Thru Art’ that were held in the Quincy School classrooms. Forty artists were recruited to lead workshops with worldwide themes for 840 students. A special exhibition of the students’ artwork held at the program’s end attracted artists, parents, community members, school administrators and many more art enthusiasts. “It was obvious...that bringing people together through art is a way to bring true happiness and empowerment to our children,” Demeter said.

From the seeds nourished in the Diversity Thru Art program grew ARCK. Founded in 2011, the nonprofit organization now provides underserved students with a visual arts education in classrooms at the J. F. Kennedy School in Jamaica Plain and the Gardiner Pilot Academy (GPA) in Allston. It hopes to raise enough funds to expand the program next year to the William Blackstone Elementary School on Shawmut Avenue and eventually to all public schools.

“ARCK is not only about the visual art experiences. It’s about opening the dialogue between students and the outside world,” said Demeter. “Through our investigation of culture and the promotion of acceptance, we will be able to expand on the understanding of respect, the ability to be self-expressive, and the mission to support the development of informed and proactive citizens of the world.”

For now ARCK is based in Demeter’s Beacon Street artist studio, where she is assisted by program director Tariq Hag and four art teachers. They are supported by many volunteers, including a board of directors, interns, parents and other community members. Teachers are trained to integrate various art media with the classroom learning objectives. Thus far, small grants, fundraisers and individual donations support ARCK’s programs.

Collaborations have been built with other nonprofits and for profit businesses. Working hand-in-hand with the D-Lab at MIT, for example, ARCK designed a program that incorporates hands-on engineering and design projects to support students’ reading comprehension and promote visual literacy for fifth graders at JFK.

ARCK’s curricula are closely aligned with those of the classroom teachers. When third graders at JFK were studying ancient cultures and religions, a teaching artist connected the art movement of Pointillism with Aborigine culture. To engage the students, she designed a project where students would create their own spirit animals using Aboriginal and pointillist elements.

At GPA, students had a creative and mathematical lesson by working on a collage project with shapes representing fractions, shapes, symmetry and balance.

ARCK challenged GPA 4th and 5th graders to paint their own unique flags of Boston. Students then shared their flags and discussed Boston’s famous landmarks, monuments and revolutionary figures like Betsy Ross, who created the first American flag. Reflecting on Demeter’s own culture, a teacher taught fifth graders Arabic calligraphy and other common themes portrayed in Arabic art, including how to write their own names.

“The ARCK program has been a fantastic support to our English and history curricula,” said Debbie O’Shea, a GPA middle school special education teacher. “When students were reading A Single Shard, a story about Korean potters, students had the opportunity to use clay to create their own pottery, which helped them to better comprehend the experiences of the characters.

It was tremendous to witness students who often shy away from the spotlight on a stage in front of the entire school describing their artwork. The ARCK program provided them the opportunity to shine.”

For more information about ‘A HeART for Arts’ or ARCK, go to www.arckboston.org.