

New Jersey Pride Ceramic Mural: My Experience as an AIE Residency Grant Recipient

By Jennifer Di Zefalo

The Artists in Education Residency Grant is sponsored by the New Jersey Council for the Arts and Young Audience Arts for Learning. The residency provides schools the opportunity to work with professional artists, creating art experiences that include the students, staff and community.

During the 2016-2017 school year, Bradley Beach Elementary School was introduced to the process of making ceramics. Through the AIE grant, we had the expertise of resident artist, Gail Scuderi, who exposed students and staff to handbuilding techniques through the study of Mesoamerican pottery. That experience laid the foundation for the 2017-2016 residency; a New Jersey pride collaboration between social studies and visual arts.

The goal of this residency was to expand students' knowledge of ceramic techniques, while reinforcing our social studies curriculum and generating New Jersey pride in our students and staff. Our goal was accomplished in the creation of a 14foot mosaic mural celebrating New Jersey.

Grade 4 students began researching New Jersey in Social Studies. 4th graders learned about NJ's state-hood, symbols, counties and government. Students created Google presentations demonstrating what they discovered during their research.

During art class, I introduced the residency plan to the 4th grade. Students expressed a great deal of excitement at the opportunity to work with Gail Scuderi again, as well as, the chance to show what they'd been learning about our great state. The first two sessions students spent with Gail, they began sketching ideas for the project. Students worked in groups of four or five. Certain elements, for example, the map of New Jersey, horses and Red Oak trees appeared in most drawings. Mrs. Scuderi used everyone's sketches, looked for common themes, and created a composition for the ceramic mural. There were plenty of oohs and ahhs at the viewing of Gail's sketch. Clearly, the students and I were enthusiastically on board for this project.

Once final decisions were made on the design, we began building clay tiles. All of the students enjoyed working

with clay. They were absolutely thrilled to have an additional hour of their schedules dedicated to ceramics. This experience was incredibly therapeutic for many students. The feel of squeezing clay is similar to squeezing a stress ball. The tactile sensation had a positive effect on a few of our more challenging students. Working as a whole group toward a common end result relieved stress in some of our more anxiety prone students, also. The idea that we were "all in this together" was welcoming and supportive of all the students and staff.

Students became more skilled and prolific at making tiles with detail and style. After the first batch of tiles were colorfully glazed and fired, students started planning. They began to layout the pieces on a true scale map of the mural.

Social studies teacher, Carolyn Power, and I updated our school board on the progress of the residency. Our presentation included NJ based activities in art, ceramics and social studies. We also invited two focus group students to present their NJ Google presentations. This proved to be an exciting evening. Students attended with their families. They posed for photographs with our new superintendent.

One of our student presenters was a 4th grader that is new to Bradley Beach. She started the year quietly, unsure of what to expect from our school. I witnessed this child become more confident through the residency. After presenting at our board meeting, she went on to talk about the project on TV! On our 4th grade trip to Trenton, she saw the gold dome of the State House and exclaimed, "I made that!" During the NJ Pride Mosaic unveiling reception, this student's family expressed gratitude for the wonderful art experiences their daughter and family participated in this year.



Besides the board presentation, this project was a part of three public events and a hand-on staff workshop:

- PTO Annual Family Fun Night
- BBES Annual Art Fair
- NJ State Symbol Mosaic reception
- One-hour ceramic tile staff professional development session.

During the PTO Family Fun Night, local families gathered in the art room, creating tiles



for the wall mosaic and building bowls for our 2nd Empty Bowls Ice Cream Social at the local food pantry. Our first Empty Bowls event was the culminating event for our 2016-2017 AIE residency with Gail. It has only been 2 years since BBES purchased a kiln. Thanks to AIE and Gail, we already have an impressive ceramics program. Using ceramics, we have bonded as a school and community. The Bradley Beach Public Library, the Bradley Food Pantry and the local artisan boutique, Intentional B, have each held events that incorporated BBES ceramics. Earlier the same day as the PTO Family Fun Night, Gail and I facilitated a staff development workshop in tile making. Teachers were able to make beautiful Bas relief tiles depicting NJ state symbols, as well as, symbols of our school. The administration and staff gave us wonderful, positive feedback. Everyone was enthusiastic about taking part in this project. The tiles were used as a border to the wall piece.

Although the mosaic was not complete in time for our winter Art Fair, I set up a work in progress table, where students could show their parents tiles they made and student Google presentations. Many children also led their families to the work site. Families became energized about the project once they saw the progress.

Seeing the first pieces on the wall was a climactic part of the process for all. By January, tiles started going up. It wasn't until then that students and staff truly saw the magnitude of the project. Watching the piece unfold before our eyes was magnificent.

Our final unveiling was held in conjunction with our Spring Concert. We held the reception prior to doors opening for the concert. Since the 4th graders were also performing, most of the participating children were in attendance. They wore their best clothes, sipped juice, ate fruit and

cheese and positively beamed with pride over what was accomplished.

The local newspaper reported on the mosaic project three times. The project even aired on television. AIE has proven to be instrumental in the rising success of our arts program. The art supply budget has grown dramatically. We now have art specific trips. For instance this year's focus group received a tour of Grounds For Sculpture. Last year's participants travelled to the Metropolitan Museum of Art, receiving an incredibly stimulating tour of the Art of the Ancient Americas collection.

AIE has truly awakened our school and community to the opportunities cross-curricular activities and pooling resources can offer. Teachers and administration were incredibly enthusiastic about the AIE Residency Grant Program. Our middle school ELA teacher was awarded an AIE residency for a poetry project next year. I am honored to be a part of that project's committee. We are hoping to keep AIE a part of the BBES experience for as long as possible.

