

Poetry Project Grows Roots in Hollister

by Amanda Chiado

Fourth grader, Mario Mora, was so excited by his new-found passion for poetry and the digital arts, he said “Now, I know what I want to do when I grow up!” In 2016, the San Benito County Arts Council kicked off an innovative Environmental Literacy Project as part of their ongoing effort to create responsive and relevant programs for their community. The project, funded in its first year by the California Arts Council, explores the Next Generation Science Standards through poetry, live performance, fine arts, content related fields, and technology.

Amanda Chiado, CalPoets Teacher and Program Manager for the San Benito County Arts Council, was much inspired by CalPoets Teacher Susan Terris’ poetry lessons on nature and sought to create an in-depth, standards-based residency program integrating art and science relevant to the students in rural Hollister. The San Benito County Arts Council’s Executive Director, Jennifer Laine encouraged the project into fruition.

The 12-week residency kicked off with a lively school-wide performance by Zun Zun Tunes from Santa Cruz entitled the *Musical Watershed*. Students learned songs that lingered well-beyond the assembly-“H2O, Go With The Flow.” In subsequent weeks, students created edible ground water models, visited the local water treatment facility, wrote four different nature poems, created watercolor artworks, restored a local watershed, and collaborated on digital poems. Students entered their poems into the Annual CalPoets Anthology, the San Benito County Fair and the Annual River of Words competition. Students performed their poems for their smiling families during the Spring Awards Assembly.

The following poem was one poem which received a blue ribbon this year at the San Benito County Fair:

The Snake

I am a snake slithering by the waves.
I am the waves where the fish swim peacefully.
I am the fish where above me is a bird.
I am a bird flying where surrounding me is the sky.
I am the sky where above me is all the different planets.
I am a planet where surrounding me is outer space.
I am outer space where below me I see a snake
Slithering by the waves.

Robbie Milstid

4th Grade

Mrs. Williams

Through CAC grant funding and partnerships with the Hollister School District, San Benito County Water Resources Association, Community Media Access Partnership and Point Blue Conservation Science, the San Benito County Arts Council was successful in offering this exciting opportunity to

over one hundred fourth grade students at Cerra Vista Elementary whose population includes 60% students of color, 20% ELL, and 40% free/reduced lunch.

Final student surveys noted: students loved the field trips, were more excited to come to school when they knew they would be participating in the program, didn't know they were poets, and acquired a greater understanding of nature. Classroom teachers were enthusiastic and actively collaborated with the teaching artists, further tying project concepts to the Common Core

Now in its second year, the Environmental Literacy Project continues at Cerra Vista Elementary, despite lack of funding from the CAC's Artists in the Schools Grant. The SBCAC has created a modified format through community support from the Water Resources Association and Hollister School District with the hopes of reapplying for funding in 2018-19. In fact, in this year's project, fourth grade students will have the opportunity to collaborate with kindergarteners on their exploration of the content as well as create 3D Recycled Artwork!

Cerra Vista's new principal, Gabriella Armenta is piloting STEAM labs at the school this year and thrilled to see the Environmental Literacy Project address Science, Technology, Engineering, Art and Mathematics.

"Students shined during the residency," Amanda said. "They were consistently making new connections and engaged in the content. It was also very exciting to see how community members, artists, poets, and classrooms teachers collaborated to educate the whole child using a dynamic and relevant curriculum. I am ready for another year of fun and learning!"

The San Benito County Arts Council in partnership with the California Alliance for Arts Education advocates for high-quality arts education for all students. The Environmental Literacy Project is just one example of enacting responsive, art-based programs, that empower students and deepen the curriculum in meaningful ways.

Learn more about the San Benito County Arts Council and The Environmental Literacy Project at www.sanbenitoarts.org

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