

Arts in Mind

Jackie LaLanne: All Children are Artists

If you or your child has taken an art class at Edna Maguire, Old Mill, Park, or Strawberry Point School since 1990, then you probably know Jackie LaLanne. Jackie is an inspired and original art teacher who, since 1998, has also served as the K-8 Art Program Coordinator for the Mill Valley School District. “Teaching kids art is the best part of my day,” Jackie recently said. This interview was conducted by a parent volunteer for Kiddo!, the Mill Valley Schools Community Foundation.

Kiddo: *What is your background in art? What drew you to art as a career?*

Jackie LaLanne: I became an art teacher relatively late in life. I graduated from UCSB in 1970 with a degree in history. After graduating, I got my teaching credential. I knew I wanted to be a teacher since age four. My cousin and I used to play “school” in our basement. She was the teacher and I was her only student. We both became teachers.

While my three children were young, I volunteered in their elementary school in San Francisco. I directed my energy towards where I believed it was most needed – art. They had no art program. I scrounged for materials, and projects, called other parents, and organized art experiences weekly. We weren’t lucky enough to have an organization like KIDDO! But the kids loved and appreciated any kind of art-making.

After moving to Mill Valley, I began working part-time as an art teacher at Park School. I realized that I wanted to make this a career, and decided to return to school to receive more training. I started at College of Marin in 1989 with my first drawing class. It was the hardest class I had ever taken, because I had stopped drawing when I was 7 or so. I didn’t think of myself as an artist, and I didn’t think I could draw very well, so I didn’t draw. In the first class my teacher asked us to draw something from memory. I sat there for a while thinking, remembering things, but not remembering anything I could draw. Then finally, I drew a very tiny, tiny, mouse with a bunch of big redwood trees. The drawing was so tentative, that you could barely see it. By the end of the semester, I could make drawings that were strong: from memory, from observation, and from my imagination. And I liked them, well, most of them. I realized I could draw, and that most people, including me, could be artists.

Kiddo: *What inspires you as an artist? What do you enjoy most about teaching art to children?*

JL: I had always done art projects at home when I was growing up. I liked to collect things around the house and make something. In school, I took lots of math and science classes. I loved biology because I got to do experiments, which to me were a lot like my art projects. That’s one reason I love teaching art. I get to help kids make things, experiment, discover. I love the look on their faces when they make new colors. “Hey Jackie,” they yell, “look at this cool color brown I made.” They make me laugh, and feel joyous for them, because they’re learning all this

new stuff. “Stuff” I never learned until a few years ago..

I want to help all children realize that they are artists. I feel strongly that students need the opportunities when they are young that I had when I was older. Making art is what truly allows me to express my feelings, ideas, and impressions of the world – something I can’t always do with words.

Kiddo: *Why is Art an Important Part of a Child’s Education?*

JL: Being able to create, to make something, makes one feel powerful. To paint, to sculpt, to assemble, to photograph, are all ways of using one’s whole self to offer to the world what some say is a self portrait. It is like a mirror vision of the inner self that cannot be seen with the eyes. One’s way of “seeing” the world is displayed in paintings, photographs, drawings, prints, and sculptures. While children are involved in this creative process, they are using their minds to make tons of decisions, or judgments. They are developing their own set of aesthetics, which help them to make decisions about themselves and the world around them.

Kiddo: *What about taking children to museums? Is it important for them to view art as well as create it?*

JL: Parents ask me what can they do to help their children with their art. One thing that helped me was having a place, actually a card table, where I could always do my art, leave my projects, and keep my supplies – my own little office. Give them lots of supplies. They don’t have to be new, but some new things are cool once in a while. Scrounge at garage sales. Go for walks along the ocean and in the forests to get inspired by nature. Go discover art. It’s all around us. You don’t have to pay to see a lot of art, but do go to a museum at least once a year. Go to see all kinds of art, even art that you don’t think is really art. And most importantly for yourself, do some art. You could ask your child to teach you how. That’s another reason I like teaching art. The kids are able teach me new things about life all the time. When doing the art, both you and your children should remember:

Play with material.

Don’t be afraid to make mistakes.

There’s more than one answer – appreciate diversity.

Try things you’ve never done – take risks.

Don’t worry about not knowing the answer – not knowing can be fun.

Trust that things turn out, even if its not part of your original plan – go with the flow.

Believe that you can make art.

“Arts in Mind” is a series from Kiddo! that explores arts and arts education.

