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### Eye to eye with students' poignant artwork

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By L.A. Winokur

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How many times have we heard it said that art can be a very powerful means of expression? If seeing is believing, then go check out the art done by students in the local chapter of Project Eye-To-Eye, a national mentoring program working with kids identified as being learning disabled (LD) and having attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD). Their work can be seen at the Westamerica Bank in downtown Mill Valley through April 15.

"It's only a small sample of what we've produced, and not all students' work is included," said Ross Buffington, co-president of It Takes a Village, the local special-education PTA sponsoring Project Eye-To-Eye. "Taken out of context, these projects may not look like 'art' in the traditional sense, but viewed through the eyes of an LD/ADHD child, they represent major life events — maybe the first time they have publicly said, 'I have a learning difference.' "

We caught up with Buffington to ask him more about the program and the pivotal role art plays in it.

Mill Valley Herald: What is it about Project Eye-To-Eye that first caught your eye?

Ross Buffington: I went to a speaker event that It Takes a Village sponsored, featuring David Flink, the founder of Project Eye-To-Eye. He had brought some mentors from Bishop O'Dowd High School in Oakland who talked about their Project Eye-To-Eye experiences. For the first time, I saw hope for my child.

MVH: Tell us more about the program, including how many kids are involved with it.

RB: Project Eye-To-Eye is a unique mentoring model that matches LD/ADHD college and high school students (mentors) with LD/ADHD elementary and middle school students. We worked closely with the Tam High District to recruit the mentors from both Tam and Redwood High. The mentees were referred by the principals of the six schools in the Mill Valley School District and range from third to eighth grade. This is our pilot year, so we only have 12 students total. We're hoping to grow to 60 kids in the next couple of years.

MVH: Art is a key part of the Project Eye-To-Eye experience. Paint a picture of what goes on in a typical Project Eye-To-Eye weekly session.

RB: Each year, Project Eye-To-Eye engages an artist in residence to develop the 14-week curriculum. The art projects are geared toward teaching the students to identify their strengths and weaknesses, develop their "meta" cognition skills (learning how they learn) and build their self-esteem. We start in a circle and establish the objectives for the session. The mentors and the mentees work one-on-one on their projects, and we come back together at the end, when each group "shares" the project and its meaning.

MVH: Why is art a perfect medium for the Project Eye-To-Eye kids?

RB: Many kids in Project Eye-To-Eye have a hard time articulating their frustrations and needs. Art is a common language that allows for the most pure form of free expression. The term "art" is very broadly defined and includes using plaster casts, paint, photography, poetry and something we call the Junk Box — random items that can be glued together to form sculptures. There is no right or wrong way to do the projects, so everyone succeeds.

MVH: What are you seeing in the kids' art?

RB: We try to focus the projects on their individual strengths and weaknesses with their learning difference, but social themes such as bullying have come out pretty universally. For instance, one week we did a "utility belt" — a super-hero belt that would have tools to help the students to get through their day. Two of the students described how they dealt with bullies or a lack of friends. One had a remote control that could "pause" bullies with the touch of a button, followed by activating the "nice" button. Another had a tool called a "friend finder" that would help him develop social relationships at school.

MVH: You are also PTA council president and work with our community schools foundation, Kiddo!, to make sure that art stays in our schools for all of our kids. Why is this so important?

RB: Not everyone is going to be good at math. Not everyone is going to be good at reading and writing. But everyone has a story to tell. No matter how broad, the use of music, poetry, sculpture, painting, etc., allows kids to be successful at something. And success spawns self-esteem. Research on risk and resilience strongly suggests that the most important factor in the life successes of adults is not IQ or academic success, but self-esteem. It is critical that programs like Kiddo! and Project Eye-To-Eye continue to provide this opportunity for the kids of Mill Valley.

*L.A. Winokur is a writer in Mill Valley. She can be reached at [lawinokur@aol.com](mailto:lawinokur@aol.com). "Arts in Mind" is a monthly column sponsored by Kiddo! For more on It Takes a Village and Project Eye-To-Eye, visit [itavmv.org](http://itavmv.org).*

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