

Olshansky makes kids' art articulate

By Klara Minkie
Staff Writer

Take out a piece of paper and some crayons. Draw a picture. It doesn't have to be a masterpiece — stick figures will do. Wet your paper and add watercolors to the picture. Don't worry, the watercolors won't cover the crayon marks. Then, if you want to, add some white tempera paint by sprinkling little spots from a paintbrush, to give the effect of snow.

When your picture is done, look at it and think of different words that can be used to describe what you see. Be creative. Use your imagination. Go wild. Either in poetry form or in prose, write whatever comes to mind.

You have just completed what children in 34 states across the country are being taught to help them read and write — except these children paint lots of pictures. They put together books and write stories to go with the pictures. It started 10 years ago when Beth Olshansky, a Newmarket resident, noticed her daughter was having a hard time learning to read and write. So she taught her to draw, and then to write about what she drew. Since it worked for

her daughter, she thought it just might work for other students, too.

Olshansky created and developed two art and literature-based programs for teachers to use to help kids who are having trouble with reading and writing — Picture Writing: Fostering Literacy Through Art, and Image-Making Withing the Writing Process.

Although the programs are being used in all grade levels, K-12, she said they are most effective in the early grades, when kids are just starting to read.

A grant from the New Hampshire Council for the Arts made it possible for Olshansky to try it out at Oyster River Elementary School in 1981. Right away, she knew that it was a success.

Children are taught the basics of painting and are shown picture books. They are encouraged to use their imaginations to create pictures and then to write stories, or words, to go along with them.

"In this process, visual is essential," Olshansky says.

This process has grown tremendously and is now being taught in other countries, thanks to different grants and federal funding for research and development of the programs.

Olshansky has just concluded a research study at UNH documenting the dramatic gains in learning by children who used the Image-Making process.

Part of the process allows children time to observe their surroundings and see the things they want to paint and write about. They focus on the different times of the day, and note the colors they see when the sun is rising or setting. Then they use this knowledge in their paintings.

"This isn't a copy program — kids express unique ideas through art," Olshansky says.

A team of trainers has traveled all over the world training more than 1,000 teachers to use these programs, and thousands of kids have benefited from it.

Samantha Bloom, a first-grader at the New Franklin School in Portsmouth, made her own book, "My Special snowman," when she was 6.

An exhibit of the children's artwork and writing, displayed for two weeks at Creative Classrooms in Raymond.

"Exhibiting is an opportunity to share, honor and celebrate the art and writing of children from around the world," Olshansky says.

For more information, call Creative Classrooms at 895-2437.



Both Olshansky oversees one of her students starting their work. Her program has grown across the U.S. since 1990 and is now starting to blossom around the world.