

## **Hanging by a Thread! “Weaving Words of Understanding”**

Teachers constantly search for new ways to inspire and engage their students in the classroom. One way we all know for sure that works is to find something meaningful and personal that the students can really relate to.

In September 2011 New Jersey initiated a strict anti-bullying, anti-harassment and anti-intimidation legislation. As artists we tend to react to these sort of social issues. As artist educators we work hard to find ways to bring these topics into our classrooms.

In preparing for a lesson on anti-bullying - I asked my students to raise their hand if they'd ever been bullied. I paused and waited. I watched in amazement when every hand went up. As a class we shared storied of what bullying looks like, how it happens and what type of people participate in it. It was a rather long conversation filled with a few surprises and sad stories.

Then I asked the class to raise their hand if they'd ever bullied someone else. Again as I paused, I was surprised to see that slowly all hands went up. Unfortunately I don't think this is unusual. Bullying comes in all shapes, sizes and colors - it does not discriminate! Everyone we could think of had been affected by it.

Over the last several years I have been fortunate to have a collaborative partnership with Dr. Jane Graziano of Rowan University and Mrs. Soyan Schwester of Delsea Regional High School in Gloucester County, NJ. Dr. Graziano's Secondary Art Education students create lesson plans and practice teaching them in both my classroom and with Mrs. Schwester's Art Club. This collaborative learning has produced wonderful outcomes as our high school students get the opportunity to work with college level students and in the end hold an exhibit at Rowan University's student art gallery. Many students, parents, community members and even administrators attend!

This past spring when we agreed to work together, Dr. Graziano had her students meet with professional performance artist and sculptor Laura Manning of NYC. Ms. Manning currently works with social issues as a focus and in our case, chose to use the ancient craft of back strap looms and weaving as our art making experience. The Rowan Art Education candidates took this idea a step further and decided to incorporate recycling and anti-bullying messages into the weavings. These lessons facilitated an experience where by high school students could explore the ways in which artists combine social issues and self-expression in creating meaningful art. By working together we were able to address the need for acceptance, tolerance and upstanding!

You might ask “what is an upstander?” It's simple: An upstander is one who stands up to bullying rather than stands by and watches. After this meaningful art making experience, it is now fashionable to be labeled an upstander at our school - this experience has been very powerful for our school community!

During this unit of study our young artists were able to create in a healthy safe environment in response to issues that are real in their world. Working together, students wove strips of recycled fabric along with meaningful found objects in representation of upstanding and

demonstrated their commitment and understanding to hope, change and safety.

After weeks of learning the history of back strap looms, making our own looms and then creating the expressively meaningful weavings - we celebrated our efforts together in the Rowan University Student Art Gallery where students were able to feel a strong sense of pride in their final works of art as the powerful woven words of understanding hung together making a huge statement against bullying. Through these works of art Gandhi's mantra that we must in fact be the change we wish to see in the world was clearly reinforced, as viewers were silently introspective in their observations.

### **Our definition**

**Upstander** (n): 1. One who is not engaged in a wrongful act, but steps in to ensure the right action occurs; 2. when witnessing an act of bullying, harassment, or intimidation, the person who stands for what they believe is right; 4. a hero; 5. **ME**

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