

Digging in on history: Oshawa Grade 8 students gets lessons on Iroquois life through art projects

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In the end it is the penetrating March cold and the eerie silence outside the tall, grey longhouse that give 25 Oshawa students a tangible notion of life among the Iroquois 600 years ago.

The Grade 8s have spent the last month studying native culture as part of an art and archeology project, which has taken them to a local history museum and to an art studio to make their own pottery in the Iroquois style.

But it is the trip to Crawford Lake Conservation Area, south of Campbellville and nearly two hours west of their school, that weaves the real scent of wood smoke into their ideas about archeology and native pottery.

These Gertrude Colpus Public School students are among about 400 from the Durham District School Board benefiting this year from ArtsSmarts, a grant program that pairs working artists with class projects.

It's teaching by stealth. These students have been so caught up in their pottery art project and their impressions of Crawford Lake, the last thing they're thinking about is the history, vocabulary and critical thinking skills they've been learning.

Leaning toward the cold fire pit in the dim longhouse, they watch program instructor Adam McDowell use a flint to start a fire from the silky entrails of a milkweed pod.

"It helps it all make sense. When we went to the museum it wasn't all that clear," says Melanie Roy, 13.

"Just to let the kids touch things - usually it's not that hands-on," says Kathy Beatty, the art teacher, who conceived the ArtsSmarts project. "This is something that will take them into high school. It gives them self-esteem, greater awareness and appreciation of where they live."

The students have come inside after playing a native game, sliding wooden poles down an alley of snow to test players' skill and strength. Until they're required to sit still around the fire pit, most have been too busy to notice the creeping numbness of their toes.

The field trip grew out of an art and archeology project Beatty believes has increased students' appreciation of the community where they live and go to school.

Situated in an aging part of Oshawa, north of Highway 401, blocks from downtown, Gertrude Colpus has a high percentage of special needs and transient students, who are accustomed to seeing their

neighbourhood cast in a negative light. Beatty wanted the students to experience their community differently.

"It's time the community knew how blessed they are," she says.

When she heard about ArtsSmarts, Beatty seized the opportunity. With less than a week to submit a grant proposal and only a vague notion of tying art to Oshawa's history, she found a reference to painted Iroquois ceramics, discovered at the nearby Grandview and MacLeod archeological sites, both within about 10 kilometres of the school.

This painted pottery was rarely found at other Ontario Iroquois sites.

Beatty co-opted local potter Barbara Kimball, who had run workshops for the board, to see if the Colpus Grade 8s could create ceramics in the Iroquois style, circa 1400.

The students took a field trip to the Oshawa Community Museum, where some of the Grandview relics are housed, to see the kind of pottery they would be making. Then they went to the city's Arts Resource Centre, where Kimball showed them how to mould and paint their own pots, pipes and effigies.

Few adults could have made pottery and clay figures as sophisticated as those the Grade 8s produced, said Kimball.

Gertrude Colpus is one of nine Durham schools that received funding from ArtsSmarts, which has given the board \$75,000 in each of three years. It's a program of the Canadian Conference of the Arts based on money from the private J.W. McConnell Family Foundation.

ArtsSmarts projects can be particularly effective in teaching children who may be at risk of not learning in more traditional ways, says the school board's arts co-ordinator, Sue Pudlubny. "A lot of kids need to see things visually, they need to move to it or touch it," she says. "A lot of times we ask kids to show us what they know by writing. This does not require them to show by writing."