

NORTH

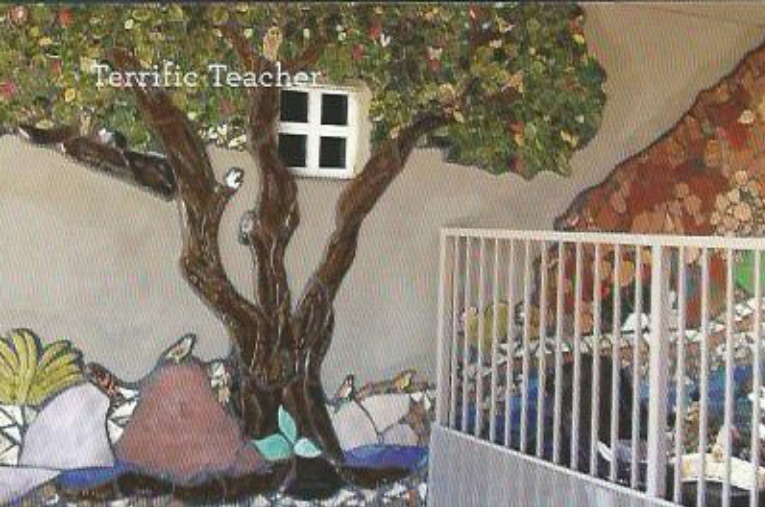
Scottsdale

L I F E S T Y L E TM

Dreaming OF AN ARIZONA Christmas

ICE SKATE OR SWIM AT CHILL
TAKE A TRIP TO THE NORTH POLE
ZOLTON'S LAUNCHES EXPRESS BAR





Tallulah Project at Pinnacle Preschool

PRESCHOOL TEACHER TELLS ALL

ARTICLE AND PHOTOGRAPHY MARY ANN BIERMEIER

BRIDGING OUR COMMUNITY WITH CLAY

It started with a community mosaic project called, The Tallulah Project. Funded initially by the Arizona Commission on the Arts, the project is designed to engage families in transforming the exterior walkways of our school. Once introduced, clay became a typical work area in our classrooms, extending and transforming learning inside our classrooms. It has become a remarkable teaching tool.

So what is it about clay that makes it so inviting? Is it the supple and malleable texture? Is it the forgiveness of the art – allowing children and adults to easily smash it down and start over? Yes, and so much more.

PINNACLE PRESBYTERIAN PRESCHOOL

Located in Scottsdale, Arizona, Pinnacle is committed to offering an educational program based upon best practices in early child development and education. Accredited by the National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC) and inspired by the schools of Reggio Emilia, the school is dedicated to enriching the lives of young children and their families through practices that teach using representational development and collaboration.

Clay materials, wire, painting, woodworking and a multitude of writing and drawing materials assist the teacher in bringing learning to life through the hands of the children. Collaboration among home, school and community is considered valuable and necessary to the whole educational experience.

THE TALLULAH PROJECT

From the start, our community agreed that we wanted to transform our adobe walls into something that reflected our desert community.

Clearly, something happens to us as individuals when we enter into spaces that are beautiful. They cause us to stop and look. Our senses are awakened. We see the colors, the movement and hear the sound of the place. We are no longer just passing through the space; we are active participants. Although commercial buildings are economical and functional, they do not express all that our culture believes about itself. We should be alarmed when the characteristics of our school buildings have more in common with places of incarceration than places of learning. Art shows us that classrooms do not have to be white, dull boxes but rather a reflection of all that teach and learn in our community.

When we provide interesting and beautiful spaces for children to learn, we are showing our children they are important to us. When we work together to create something beautiful, we strengthen relationships within our community. When we put art back into our environments and back into the curriculum, we nurture the inventiveness we desire to develop in all children.

We have rendered a mosaic depicting the landscapes of Arizona and how they are transformed by water. A large tree greets families upon entering the school, each

leaf carrying the name of a child, parent, grandparent, and even pets of our community. Carved into the trunk of the tree are character traits we seek to foster within our children and ourselves.

The Native American meaning of Tallulah is “Running Water”. Choosing to use water as our subject was not by chance. We created a desert arroyo from which plants, trees and the many creatures of the Sonoran Desert quench their thirst. This is the environment that our families live. We know that through water, a backyard, a park or a playground can be transformed into a lovely oasis.

WHAT ARE CHILDREN LEARNING THROUGH CLAY?

Clay is an ancient and organic material to which children and adults are naturally drawn. Children love to touch, squeeze, pinch, mold, and create with clay. We observe developmental learning as children work the clay.

Social & Language Fluency – often children share their ideas about what they are creating. Clay gives children an outlet to represent what is happening in their lives and builds conversational and storytelling skills between peers and adults.

Critical Thinking – the medium of clay naturally causes children to approach their work with a mindset of problem solving. They observe, experi-

ment, and learn from error and repetition.

Fine Motor – working the clay builds stronger hand muscles. The task of squeezing, pinching, poking and prodding develops young hands and fingers.

As children work with clay, they pass through several stages of exploration. Teachers give the children time, often over many class periods, to explore and create using clay.

Children use basic shapes such as balls and coils to create animals, people and objects in their world. As their experience grows they create more elaborate structures such as houses, people with arms and legs, animals and objects with greater detail. Children begin to focus on trying to make their creations look “real”.

Teachers are careful to use descriptive comments about what they are observing such as:

“I see you used balls to make the caterpillar. How did you get the balls to stick together?”

“I see you made a house. What details could you add?”

“I see you carefully smoothed the joints. This will help your sculpture last a long time.”

Children become aware of different techniques, imitating successful outcomes and revisiting their own creations by adding detail.

BUILDING COMMUNITY

When people visit our school they are often surprised to learn that students, parent volunteers, teachers and students make the tiles. From the start of the project, we were not interested in bringing in a mosaic muralist to do all the work. On the contrary, our intention was to become students of the art and learn how to make the tiles ourselves.

Tiles are made in the classrooms, the art studio and at Saturday family clay workshops. We have a parent committee that provides assistance at the workshops, glazing and placing the tiles on the walls.

We encourage families to “Leave their mark on the walls”.

As adults model respect for others, children learn the ways of kindness, consideration and harmony.

When teachers listen carefully and ask open-ended questions, children learn that what they think and what they want is important to others. Children learn to share



their thoughts and ideas.

With real experiences, children learn to be resourceful in solving problems. They learn to be respectful of tools and materials. Given the opportunity to revisit their work, children learn to strive for quality.

When we direct our energy into creating something beautiful together as a community – we find common ground.

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