

Popular after-school art program turns ordinary students into 'Young Rembrandts'

Megan Born, 8, of Neenah gets rid of some excess dust as she works on a pastel print for the Young Rembrandts drawing program. Below, The Young Rembrandts children's drawing program is designed to maximize each child's creative potential. From left, McKenzie Johnson, 8, Dominic Tesch, 7, and Maria Tomashek, 5, work with markers.

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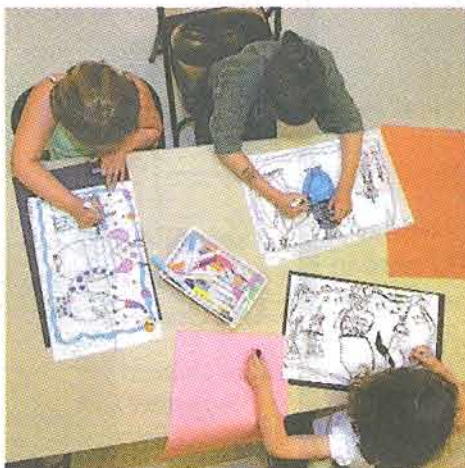


BY KRISTIN BRANTMEIER STANKEWICZ

Blue is a boy's color. I don't want that one!" a pig-tailed 5-year-old girl announces to her fellow art students at Neenah's Washington Park.

The instructor, John Polansky of Appleton, gently corrects her. "There are no 'boy' colors or 'girl' colors. Every color is everybody's color," he says with a smile.

The kids are attending a summer session of Young Rembrandts, an after-school art program that teaches drawing as a learnable



skill, not just a natural talent. Today's lesson has the kids drawing colorful, friendly-looking monsters.

"We teach skills training, how to visualize and break things down into simple shapes," says Polansky, who owns the Young Rembrandts franchise in northeastern Wisconsin. "We focus on fine motor skills and self-esteem."

Founded by Illinois artist Bette Fetter 15 years ago, the Young Rembrandts program now has about 49 franchisees nationwide. Classes are offered through school districts, parks departments, libraries, day care centers and the YMCA. The program's philosophy is

that although not all children are artistically gifted, most can follow simple instructions based on geometric shapes.

During each lesson, the kids watch as a teacher draws on a whiteboard in front of the classroom. The kids then try to re-create the same thing on their own papers, with guidance and encouragement from the teacher.

"We teach the 'how,'" Polansky says. "It doesn't matter how old they are. When they're done, they all say the same thing: 'Oh my gosh! I drew that!'"

During the school year, classes are held once a week after school. Classes are 45 to 60 minutes, depending on age.

Each four-week class block, which costs parents \$30, focuses on one still life, one graphic, one art-history lesson and one picture of something "fun or different," according to Polansky. "Young Rembrandts has enough different class blocks so that a child could go from age 3 to 12 without repeating a class," he says.

Polansky knows from personal experience how it feels to grow up believing you're "no good at art."

"I wish this had been around when I was 5 years old," he says. "I grew up with a sister who was a naturally gifted artist. I wasn't."

During college, Polansky was required to take an art class. He chose a drawing class at his sister's urging. To his surprise, he discovered that he could draw well. "It was the way we were doing things – partially the way the instructor taught, partially that it was a looser style of drawing."

Polansky took another drawing class the next semester, and he was hooked. He decided to transfer schools and study design. "I did nothing but draw for the next five years."

After graduating from Florida State University, he pursued a career in software development and went to work for Kimberly-Clark. He got involved with Young Rembrandts because "I was looking for a business opportunity that would benefit the community," he says. "I fell in love with Young Rembrandts because it's such a good program."

As a franchisee, Polansky meets with area school districts and organizations to let them know the benefits of Young Rembrandts classes. "It's really easy for the schools," Polansky says. "The time investment isn't much, just a meeting. The schools provide after-school classroom space and hand out flyers. We do everything else."

The "everything else" includes hiring instructors with art backgrounds, creating flyers, collecting registrations, bringing necessary materials and making sure all children are picked up after class.



John Polansky of Appleton, a specially trained teacher for Young Rembrandts, helps Jacob Nault, 11, of Neenah with a pastel print. At left, Valerie Lambert, 5, of Neenah, works with markers.

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This fall, Young Rembrandts classes will be available in Menasha and Kimberly schools. Neenah is considering a Saturday program as well, Polansky says.

"Art budgets are getting cut everywhere, but it's a double-edged sword for us," Polansky says. "Some states, like Illinois, have cut funding for art classes in public schools, so Young Rembrandts runs the school art programs."

Polansky says replacing school art programs isn't in the best interest of kids. "School art programs should do more than just drawing. But Young Rembrandts drawing skills can boost skills used in school art programs," he says.

Contributing writer Kristin Brantmeier Stankewicz lives in Appleton and wrote about traveling in Europe for the summer edition of YOU magazine.

FOR MORE INFORMATION on Young Rembrandts, call John Polansky at (920) 954-6206 or e-mail john.polansky@youngrembrandts.com.

