

Her mission brings arts to schools

EDUCATION: Valley mom's nonprofit raises funding for materials.

By **Connie Llanos**
Staff Writer

RESEDA — Growing up in Colorado in the 1970s, Spike Dolomite Ward was labeled the “class artist” for her eccentric style and bubbly energy and she was given limitless opportunities to exercise her creative talents.

Years later, after having a son, Ward noticed he shared those same qualities. But as a student in a Los Angeles Unified School, her son was classified as hyper, spacey and disorganized.

Being a trained artist, Ward knew all her son needed was a creative outlet, but she realized then that her local school could not provide arts classes on a regular basis.

“I couldn’t believe that, being in Los Angeles, the arts and entertainment capital of the world, the kids in my son’s school couldn’t go on a field trip unless the PTA paid for it and that visual arts were not part of the regular curriculum,” Ward said.

After fundraising and volunteering to bring art supplies and teachers to her son’s school, the stay-at-home mom decided to launch the Arts in Education Aid Council, a nonprofit dedicated to restoring music, painting and culture to San Fernando Valley classrooms.

Nine years later, with grant funding and private donations, Ward brings thousands of dollars worth of materials and programming to local schools.

And beyond the classroom she also sets up art shows like the second annual Valley Art Teacher Gallery that opens today in Pasadena, where local art teachers can sell their pieces.

“Teachers are spending money out of their own pocket sometimes just to get the basics for their kids. This is just a small way to say thank you,” Ward said.

At a time when funding for arts programs in Los Angeles Unified School District schools is being slashed or frozen, Ward feels her program is needed more than ever.

Nancy Oda, principal at Maurice Sendak Elementary School in North Hollywood, is one of a handful of Valley schools that gets Ward’s program full time.



Spike Dolomite Ward is executive director of the Arts in Education Aid Council, which is sponsoring a show at the Armory Center for the Arts in Pasadena through Feb. 22. It features works from Valley teachers including Donna Mercer’s “Vonnegut — and so it goes ...,” left, and Carol Orzak’s “So Be Good For Goodness Sake.” For more photos, go to dailynews.com.

Hans Gutknecht/Staff Photographer



Oda calls Ward a “godsend.” “She comes in and asks me what I need and then she goes and gets it for me. It’s amazing because she doesn’t have to do this for anyone,” Oda said.

Ward provides supplies and services to more than 200 Valley schools but currently she gives full-time programming to five local schools including Sendak, Van Alden and Melvin Avenue Elementary.

Oda said the programming includes full-time art docents for all students, violin lessons, recorder lessons and organized family art days. She estimated that the value exceeds \$100,000 a year.

“But this also brings beauty to our day. Some of our kids may be struggling in their core subjects but by honoring their talents we empower them.”

Veteran art teacher Carol Orzak of North Hollywood High School said Ward’s donations have been a relief after operating on a shoestring budget for years.

Orzak has used her own money several times over the years to buy supplies for her underfunded classes.

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Her work has also been noticed by LAUSD officials.

“It is so important that the public take ownership and make a commitment to arts opportunities in schools ... The (Arts in Education Aid Council) does this so admirably in San Fernando Valley,” said Richard W. Burrows, director of arts education for the district.

Ward admits that her mission of providing full arts programming to all Valley public schools is ambitious.

In nine years she’s adopted five schools — only 195 more to go.

But the spunky mother, who sports teal pyramid earrings with matching eye shadow, is motivated by her desire to give kids in L.A. what she had growing up as a kid.

“We have a whole generation of kids, and teachers, who are afraid of the arts because they’ve never had it taught in their schools and they think it is just for mysterious, talented people and shy away from it,” Ward said.

“So many children now are classified as weird, diagnosed as ADD (attention deficit disorder) and medicated. In fact, they just might need to be given creative things to do ... It’s an atrocity that all kids don’t have this.”

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connie.llanos@dailynews.com
818-713-3634