

Art for our Earth

In honor of Earth Day, I invited Melissa Filiaggi, the recycling program manager for Harford County, to visit my art classes to discuss the importance of caring for our environment *and* create some cool art from recycled materials.

Melissa happens to be one of my best friends. The irony of our Earth Day teaching experience is that we both started college as art majors at Towson. I ended up becoming an English teacher, while Melissa studied biology so intensely that she spent almost two years living in the Peruvian rain forest. After teaching in the public schools, the opportunity came up for her to work directly on improving the environment, which led her to her current position. Her creativity and understanding of children are gifts that allow her to continue to teach about environmental responsibility at various schools and events in the community.

The students and I were so excited that we were having a visitor. Melissa gave an interactive presentation about what happens to plastic water bottles when they are recycled. Students bounced up and down while pretending to ride on the truck to the recycling center, did their best impersonations of The Wicked Witch as they melted down, and stretched their arms as high as they could reach when they were pulled into plastic threads that could be used to make new material. Then, Melissa showed the students a fleece scarf, a fuzzy teddy bear, and an Under Armour running shirt that were made of recycled water bottles.

We discussed how artists recycle old materials to create beautiful art. I mentioned the American Visionary Art Museum, Baltimore's home for the eclectic work of self-taught modern artists, and told the students that even they had the ability to create something unique using the materials in the bins on their tables. Once they figured out what they wanted, Melissa, me, and some wonderful parent volunteers would assemble their work with hot glue guns.

You could have powered a jet with the energy surging throughout the room. Tin cans sprouted faces. Soda bottles grew feathers and became birds. Vehicles were assembled with the love and care that goes into restoring a classic car (except these were more enviro-friendly). Musical instruments filled the room with a joyful noise. And one of my pre-K boys made a "tickle device" that could brighten up anyone's bad day.





Some of the art was a free-formed collection of things the artist perceived to be beautiful. It didn't matter that they didn't have a function. What mattered is that these objects weren't headed directly to the landfill. Contrary to our society's tendency for disposal, this "trash" was given a second chance and a new purpose. More importantly, children's eyes were opened to possibilities by engaging the whimsical right side of their brains.



Encouraging subsequent generations to problem-solve by thinking "outside-of-the-box" is an essential part of restoring and preserving our planet. A STEM education, such as the one we provide at St. Joan of Arc, offers young people the opportunity to work collaboratively and reach solutions through a balance of sound reasoning and ingenuity. Sure we spared two giant trashcans worth of junk from entering the waste cycle, but more importantly, the students learned that the world is in danger and that it's not too late for them to make a difference.