TAPPING THE CREATIVITY OF BLIND AND VISUALLY IMPAIRED STUDENTS
by Chris Kuell


From the Editor: Teachers who have always thought of art in solely visual terms may feel daunted by the prospect of including a blind student in an art class. Verna O'Donnell, an art instructor in Deep River, Connecticut, firmly believes that art is for everyone. She shares her enthusiasm and creativity with sighted and blind students alike.

Melissa, a willowy sixth-grader, sits at her art class table meticulously picking through a bag of pebbles to find just the right ones. The assignment is to create a landscape from the various materials the teacher has provided. The student creates a cliff overlooking a river on the left side of her paper with the pebbles she's chosen. A river of thick blue paint soon flows over the cliff, creating a vibrant waterfall. Melissa pastes on a short beach area with sandpaper and makes a few bushes with felt. A thin, cotton-ball cloud decorates the sky, and the final touch is a cat cut from foam, settled on the beach to enjoy the scenery.

Melissa's classmates warmly receive her picture, and are eager to share their projects with her. As she runs her hands over a friend's artwork, he explains that it's a winter mountaintop. He's in the picture, skiing down the slope.

"There is no bigger thrill than figuring out a cool new way to adapt an art project," says Verna O'Donnell, a paraprofessional. She shares her passion for art with students and teachers alike.

Eight years ago Verna was invited to help at the preschool her daughters had attended. The school had a blind student, and the teachers knew O'Donnell could find a way for her to participate in art projects with her class.

Unfortunately, Melissa didn't share her new instructor's enthusiasm. "It wasn't easy to win her over," O'Donnell says. "But after a good deal of trial and error she was hooked. We came up with ways to keep her hands clean so she could explore comfortably, and added textures and scents to projects. The changes were met with a lot of excitement from her classmates, which helped sway her."

O'Donnell was a freelance photographer when the opportunity to work with Melissa came along. She followed her to elementary school, where the art teacher was enthusiastic about incorporating tactile and sensory art into the curriculum. O'Donnell decorated her office door with masks and a variety of artwork which all the students enjoyed. Her work affected the students' attitudes about blindness. "Many of the students think about making their classroom art projects accessible," O'Donnell explains. "Some students have come to me for advice on ways to make their drawings tactile. Several students have learned some Braille as well. It is amazing to me how such a small thing can alter the way people look at the world."

O'Donnell has expanded her passion for bringing art to blind students. She has taught classes and special workshops for the NFB of Connecticut, the summer program at the Oakhill School in Hartford, and the Perkins School for the Blind in Watertown, Massachusetts. She doesn't use textbooks or Internet sources for planning art projects. Instead, she relies on her creativity and imagination. "Honestly, I make most of it up as I go along," she says. "I get an idea and start experimenting. I try to have several backup plans for blind students, because you never know how much art they have been exposed to, or what their skill level might be. My first priority is for them to have fun. If it is too frustrating, you will lose them. The end result is not as important as the process. Students will improve with practice. If they are having a great time they are more likely to stick with it."

One of O'Donnell's favorite projects is to have students decorate masks. She has also found that
students enjoy creating landscapes; Melissa's scene with the waterfall and beach is a good example. Imaginary landscapes open the doors for discussion about books, stories, and fantasy locales.

People tend to think that creating art is a purely visual process. O'Donnell believes that when blind or visually impaired children take part in art class on equal terms with their sighted classmates, they become empowered to participate in other areas that also might be considered off limits. She encourages art teachers to welcome the opportunity to work with blind and visually impaired students. "Don't get locked into one approach to something," she advises. "That is a guarantee it will not work. Anything can be adapted. Relax and have fun!"

Materials for the Blind Student's Art Cabinet
Craft glue--This glue is thicker and much easier to work with than the more commonly used white glue. Things don't slide around as easily.  
Craft foam with adhesive backing--With this material the child can create shapes and stick them down on the paper. Adhesive foam is a great material for students who are new to art. If the student is not proficient with scissors, the teacher can cut out shapes or purchase ready-made foam shapes.  
Craft foam--This material is very useful for teaching drawing. The student can draw on a piece of paper laid over a sheet of craft foam. The pen or pencil creates a raised-line drawing that is a mirror image of the original.  
Hot glue gun--Hot glue is a quick way to make raised lines. With the glue the teacher can outline a drawing for the student to paint or color with crayons.  
Fabric scraps--Scraps of various textures can be used to compose landscapes and other tactile pictures. Felt, fur, lace, and assorted trims can serve many creative purposes.  
Assorted natural materials--Pebbles, small shells, twigs, and even sand are all great for making landscapes.

Resources
Art Beyond Sight: compiles information about art instruction and art appreciation for blind children and adults--<www.artbeyondsight.org>
National Federation of the Blind Krafters Division: Online classes and discussions--<http://krafterskorner.blogspot.com>
NFB-Krafters Korner: a free listserv for blind crafters and artists who share tips and ideas. Go to <www.nfbnet.org> to subscribe.  
Project Ideas: Suggestions for art projects for blind and visually impaired kids, designed for home schoolers--<www.tsvi.edu/Education/artideas.htm>