

Sculpting their love of artistry

Teacher gets students to learn about culture

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When pieces of public art around Charlottesville were vandalized last year, Baker-Butler Elementary School art teacher Isabelle Ramsey was particularly disturbed.

"The vandalism issue ... to me, is a large part of what I teach in art," she said. "If you don't like something, should you walk all over it, or try to understand what the artist is trying to do?"

Last spring, she asked Aaron Fein, one of the local artists whose work — sponsored by local nonprofit ArtInPlace — was defaced, to come to her school and reconstruct his sculpture, Transformer I. He taught students how it was created and what it meant to him. Fein and his young apprentices then let their creative instincts kick in, working together on Transformer II, to be placed in the atrium of the school this fall.

It was an opportunity for Fein to rebuild his work, and for Ramsey's young artists to learn about the sculpting process and the meaning of public art. Fein had each student build a square out of wooden dowels and plastic tubing, which he used to construct Transformer II.

Ramsey has taken the idea of public art at Baker-Butler to a new level. Last winter, she churned out a laborious grant request to the Virginia Commission for the Arts, initially asking for money to have another artist create work at the school. But while writing the grant request, her "ideas got bigger and bigger." About a month ago, she found out she'd secured more than \$6,000 to create a sculpture garden on Baker-Butler's grounds this year.

"In a year when Virginia had a huge shortfall and they slashed and burned everything, you've still got enough people



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Isabelle Ramsey, art teacher at Baker-Butler Elementary School, walks along the extensive paths behind the school. Sculptures may soon adorn the path, which students use to walk to class.

who were willing to support the concept of fine arts and education," she said. Her efforts were helped along by \$1,000 each from school principal Keith Hammon (on behalf of the school), the Albemarle school system and the school PTO, she said.

Ramsey added that the sculpture park wouldn't be possible without the help of Dan Mahon with the Albemarle Parks and Recreation Department, who is in charge of the extensive trail system sprawling through parts of the roughly 60 northern Albemarle acres on which Baker-Butler sits.

"It's kind of a synergy of people who love the arts," said Pam Moran, assistant superintendent for instruction, who said the idea germinated in conversations between her, Hammon and Ramsey before Baker-Butler's fall 2002 opening.

During the 2003-04 school year, Fein will join local stone cutter Al Francis and sculptor Mike Zavada in creating the

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sculpture garden. Each will create a new work, part off-grounds and part on-grounds, where Ramsey's art students can watch them work. One of their pieces will be erected in one of two courtyards at the school, and the other two will sit among a system of trails on the property, Ramsey said. Each work will reflect themes of nature and the environment.

Francis said he plans to craft a large stone ball popping out of a pod, an expression of "the theory of like an expanding brain or an expanding universe."

Francis, also an energy management technician with the county, has taught the difficult craft of stone-cutting to local students before. He said that the art is universally captivating — and for some reason, especially so for students whom teachers have had trouble with in the past.

"I'm really into having kids knowing how it's done. That's what I see as the real value of the project," he said.

Ramsey said the sculpture garden, the components of which will be built on a staggered schedule, will redefine what "art" means to her students. It's an insight she hopes they'll share with their peers, helping to prevent acts of vandalism against public art works in the future.

"If you look around you, everywhere you look, things are art. Facades of buildings, cars we like ... all of that is an aesthetic judgment about what's beautiful, what we find pleasing," she said. Art class, she added, should not merely entail "putting kids in a room and giving them a ball of clay."

"I think art is like the shamans. If it's a good artist, they're tapping into things that everybody's feeling. I'm just trying to convey that to kids so they have some framework for thinking about this stuff for the rest of their lives."

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