

Moved to learn language

Bluepalm makes the brain-body connection in Montebello



It's 9:30 a.m. on a sunny February morning. In a multi-function room just off a courtyard in the Joseph Gascon Elementary School complex, parents of kindergartners are engaged in full body movement and unison speech heavy on action verbs under the direction of Bluepalm's Tom Crocker. The room is brimming with energy and smiles.

'I am a firefighter
I drive the fire truck
I climb the ladder
I put out the fire.'

Bluepalm has created action verb poems, like the one about the fireman, to integrate dance and theatre techniques with English language learning in the Montebello Unified School District, where the majority of students and parents are Spanish speakers. Parents are experiencing the same process as their kindergartener offspring to both learn English and reinforce their children's learning at home.



Tom Crocker (right) and helps lead parents at Gascon Elementary.



Student at Greenwood Elementary refines arm movements.

Having just completed its second year, the Bluepalm program has met with success and enthusiasm. Letters of support from teachers at each of the six elementary schools that have the program as well as video documentation of student work and teacher responses detail progress. Cited are such accomplishments as enhanced self-confidence, increased fluency in reading, speaking in whole sentences, more active participation by students and growth in physical ability and vocabulary.

Arts for All's Vision:

Every public school student in Los Angeles County will receive a high-quality K-12 education of which the arts are an intrinsic part of the core curriculum. Each County school district will acknowledge that exposure to and participation in the multiple arts disciplines:

- strengthens a child's academic growth and development as an individual;
- prepares the child to feel a part of and make a positive contribution to the community; and
- ensures a creative and competitive workforce to meet the economic opportunities of the present and future.

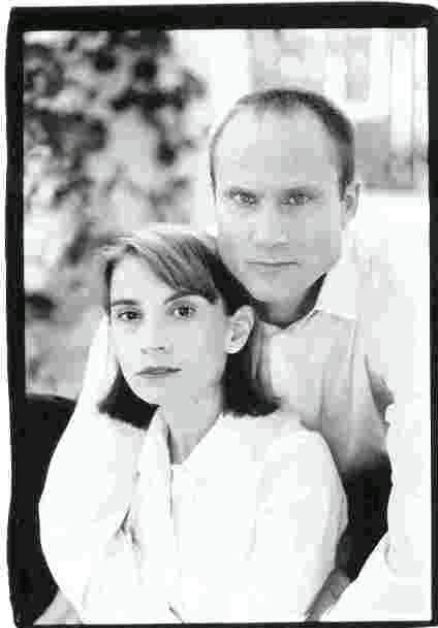
Thus, sequential instruction in the multiple arts disciplines will be scheduled into the school day and included in the budget of every County school district.

The Bluepalm program in Montebello is supported by *Arts for All's* Residency Grant Program that provides funding to *Arts for All* school districts that must be matched by the district. (*Arts for All* school districts have adopted an arts education policy and long-range plan to provide sequential K-12 arts education based on the California state standards for visual and performing arts.) Districts draw from a vetted roster of artists and arts organizations, Programs for Students, on the recently launched *Arts for All* website, www.lacountyartsforall.org. All resident artists are skilled to partner effectively with classroom teachers and provide a standards-based curriculum.



It might seem like Crocker and Bluepalm co-artistic director Jackie Planeix have taken a giant leap from venues like Broadway's Minskoff Theatre to Gascon Elementary but in many ways they haven't.

Their cross disciplinary experience goes way back to their days at the European Arts Institute, MUDRA, in Brussels, Belgium, directed by French choreographer Maurice Béjart, where they studied dance, theater, music, improvisation and interdisciplinary composition. Upon graduation, they toured the world with the Béjart Ballet, performing in such venues as the La Scala de Milano, the Bolshoi, the Comédie Française in Paris, the Teatro Colon in Buenos Aires as well as major New York venues. They presented their first works as Bluepalm in 1982 in Geneva, Switzerland, and concentrated on performance for a number of years. However during that period they always did workshops as well and even created a dance program for middle schools in Switzerland. Their educational work assumed a new importance when their daughter Madeleine entered school back in the U.S.



Jackie Planeix and Tom Crocker

Jackie gives a mock scream when describing her first reaction to Madeleine's school. "The school culture is so antithetical to the arts culture," she says. Yet she and Tom have found ways to meld schools' demand for a high level of compliance with helping the students to become themselves in a way that parallels the development of artists.

“Ideally, the artistic process correlates with the learning process,” says Jackie. She points out that she and Tom come from art forms – dance and theatre – that use the body. Most school experiences do not. “Yet with children, everything is embodied, like learning to walk,” she says. So they came up with an approach to teaching language acquisition in which the brain and body work together, developed in partnership with principals, teachers and parents from Montebello district schools.



As one teacher noted about this fun, non-threatening means of language learning, “Keeping in mind that I have no dance and theater background, this program has demonstrated that incorporating the arts is not so far-fetched. The program has given me knowledge and know-how.”

Integrating the arts into other curricular areas and providing professional development for classroom as well as arts specialist teachers are among the Montebello school district’s arts education priorities addressed by the Bluepalm project, noted district Arts Coordinator Leonard Narumi. Embedding the Bluepalm program in the district’s policy and associated strategic plan has been a key factor in developing the program.



Jackie Planeix leads teachers in a professional development session.

Crocker and Planeix linked their program to areas of focus in the plan, thus ensuring the work would provide lasting benefits to the district. They envision a four-year program to maximize outcomes. As Crocker notes, “When a program is for only one year, there are no systemic remnants left behind. Repetition over time is extremely beneficial to transformational change.”

(Arts for All’s Residency Grant Program has just received, for the sixth year in a row, a grant from the National Endowment for the Arts to support residencies; grant recipients for the 2011-12 school year will be announced in August.)

Crocker and Planeix cannot stress enough the importance of parental involvement in the program. In the future they envision parent mentors in the classroom. “They are a bridge and we didn’t know the program was going to have this effect,” says Planeix. “One parent said the action verb poems corresponded very well to Latino populations, where inflection and gesturing are used much more than in the Anglo world. Some of the women rarely have the experience of using English on occasions other than going to the DMV or dealing with their children’s school. The joyous and whimsical exercises connect them with English in an entirely different way.”