

NO RIGHT OR WRONG

BY MICHELE ALPERIN
PHOTOS BY PHIL MCAULIFFE

NEW BUSINESS TEACHES YOUNG PUPILS TO CREATE AND CRITIQUE ART



Julie Rosenthale instructs her young students about artist Vincent van Gogh.

For Julie Rosenthale, opening Art Sparks, a studio where children learn about and create art, made a lot of sense. Thrilled to have art as part of her daily life, she has finally one-upped her dad, who used to say in reference to her art history degree (and fine arts minor) from Emory University, “She is studying how to be a good conversationalist.”

Indeed she is an excellent conversationalist; one might even use the word “inspired,” when she talks about her approach to art with the children she teaches.

Before opening her studio, Ms. Rosenthale had been teaching art for several years at the nursery and religious schools of the Jewish Center in Princeton, where she started to develop her techniques for teaching art to young children. She would often teach them about artists’ lives, would share their work, and then would prod the children to analyze the artists’ work as well as their own.

“It is a wonderful opportunity for young children to give their opinion about something and to give a critique of their artwork without being judged for what they are saying,” she says. “There is no right and wrong, I tell them.”

Her approach also encourages children to tell stories. Looking at a Picasso painting, for example, she might ask them: Why do you think this woman is crying? Why did Picasso choose to make her look abstract and use bright colors and funny shapes and two eyes on the side of her head?

“This teaches them to develop narrative and to learn how to tell a story,” says Ms. Rosenthale. “It helps them start to develop critical thinking skills, and it teaches them to appreciate different ways of perceiving the world.”

A good example of the approach she has begun to evolve at Art Sparks is a class where the children created still lifes à la Cezanne. She opens by helping the children notice that a piece of fruit is not really one single color, but includes flecks of many hues. She also tells them a little about Cezanne, helps them understand what a still life is, and then teaches them the techniques they will need to draw with pastels.

As they work, she will also point out what different children are doing, for example, “Look at how Caroline made a giant oval but Sophie is focusing on tinier shapes.”

She explains her approach: “It’s a combination of noticing art and what

is in their surroundings, how artists perceive their surroundings, then applying their own technique and using materials to create their own perception.”

Children also need to realize that an art project is not necessarily completed in a single session.

“Creating art is a process,” she says. “It takes many steps to complete their final product.”

She had been mulling the possibility of opening her own studio for a long time, inspired by a friend who told her about a studio in Atlanta and said, “This would be so you!”

Of course opening a business is daunting, but an email from a neighbor and a little nudge from her husband were all she needed. The email informed her that Creative Kids Place, which had been in Hopewell for seven years, was closing, and urged her to give the owner a call. When Ms. Rosenthale forwarded the email to her husband, he replied in caps: “JUST DO IT.”

So she bought the business, which included a space already well configured for her needs, with a party room, studio area, bathroom, and lots of cabinetry for storage. All she had to add was furniture and a Plexiglas wall where kids could “paint on the wall”— something Ms. Rosenthale apparently did regularly as a child, including a mural on the wall between the bunk beds in her room at age 2.

Art Sparks will offer an art camp this summer with programs including 10 half-day, one-week sessions catering to different age groups. Themes include art around the world; pop art; mythical creatures; bugs and insects; outer space; and “by the book,” where the children will create art based on the techniques of famous author illustrators. Details are available at artsparksstudio.com.

During the year she offers one-hour, age-based classes as well as mini-camps for “those pesky times when there are short periods where there is no school and people are looking for activities for their kids.” Spring break, for example. She also hopes to launch a new “open studio” product where families can come in and pay a fee to stay and use art supplies. Weekends she reserves for theme-based parties, which have been very popular.

Ms. Rosenthale attributes her love of art and art education to two mentors. The first was her grandfather, a reasonably prolific amateur painter who gave her one of his paintings for her 7th birthday. She remembers his continuing support.

“When he saw how much I appreciated his art and had a natural inclination toward creating art, he gave me a canvas, paint, and pencils,” she says. “He would always have discussions with me about art; he had a coffee table book about da Vinci that we would always talk about.”

She also had a very influential high school art teacher, Steve Moss, who very much influenced her own

approach to art (and apparently that of several others of her classmates who are making their livings as artists).

“He put art in a context of life,” she says. “It wasn’t just about a technique.”

What was particularly important for Ms. Rosenthale was the opportunity he gave them to critique their own and each other’s work in a safe environment.


“I never had the opportunity except in that class to take a step back, think about what I could have done better, how we approached our work, how we selected our materials, and what we were thinking when we were creating,” she says.



4-year-old Kaitlyn Osborne of Hopewell creates a masterpiece at Art Sparks.



She added, “He also made sure we were very hands-on with our arts material. We had to use an Exacto knife to whittle the point on our charcoal pencils; we had to cut our own matte boards; and he taught us how to stretch a canvas. It was a real culture of creativity.”

As she excitedly showed off the projects that the children in her classes are working on – flowers inspired by Georgia O’Keeffe, African masks, Chinese dragons from paper towel tubes, and Jasper Johns flashlights from toilet paper tubes, ribbon spools, and a metal nut – it is clear that Ms. Rosenthale has created her own culture of creativity. 

Art Sparks is located at 33 Railroad Place, Hopewell. For more: 609-466-5437; www.artsparksstudio.com or email: info@artsparksstudio.com