

Poet in residence at San Jose's Hammer Montessori helped students publish poetry book

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There are few poets who can claim first being published when they were in fifth grade and fewer still who were in kindergarten.

That's not the case with the 316 students of Hammer Montessori Elementary School in Willow Glen.

Every student has at least one poem and most have two in the newly published Hammer Montessori Anthology of Poetry 2013.

The three-quarter-inch thick book is the result of collaboration between the school faculty and the Hammer Montessori Foundation.

"With the new common core standards, there's a higher focus on writing, and we're trying to make it more interesting and more of an incentive for the students to write," says Lynn Belmonte, principal at Hammer Montessori.

When the faculty suggested bringing in a poet-in-residence through the nonprofit California Poets in the Schools program, the foundation provided the needed funding.

Amanda Chiado, a published poet, started working with the school in February. After developing lesson plans with the teachers, she met with each of the 11 different classes for three consecutive weeks.

One class was studying Vincent Van Gogh, so Chiado suggested to the students that "we imagine ourselves as artists and write about ourselves."

Another teacher was focusing on music, so, she says she encouraged the students to write about jazz.

With the kindergarten students, Chiado says she kept poems to one or two sentences and very simple.

"You're teaching them about similes and metaphors. They might not get the concept, but they can write, 'My family is like a dinosaur roaring.'"

On Valentine's day they talked about things they loved and made them happy. "We generated lines on 'Love is,' and they came back with 'when my mommy kisses me' or 'when my puppy licks my hand.' We did colors in a similar fashion."

Chiado says one of her key goals is to try and get them to think outside the box and use their imagination.

"We talked about surprise--you want to surprise yourself and you want to surprise your reader," she tells them. "I try to steer them away from clichés, like the red rose is beautiful."

She asked, "Do you want to hear that over and over? And they said, No."

She pointed out to the students: "Some songs repeat and repeat and it's great, and some songs repeat

and repeat and it drives you crazy."

Three of the students from Hammer Montessori attended the June 3 meeting of the San Jose Unified School District board and presented each member with a copy of the anthology.

Jacobi Dangerfield, a third-grader, read his "A Dream" from the book; Emilio Macias, a fifth-grader, read "Jazz,"; and third-grader Stella Von Borck read "Be" to the board.

Jacobi's poem and "They Came to See Me" by fourth-grader Chloe McCreight will also appear in the CPITS statewide anthology of poetry.

The project has been so successful that Belmonte says the school will definitely do it again next year. "The students were thrilled to see their writing published in a book," she says

Kristina Loquist, president of the Hammer Montessori Foundation, says, "It was exciting to see how the project rippled throughout the community.

"Of all the things the foundation has funded, this has been the project that has given us the most positive experience. The enthusiasm and passion this project ignited was unanticipated and gratifying."