

As seen in the

The Washington Post

Thursday June 11, 2009

By Julie Rasicot, Special to The Washington Post

Students Showcase Interest, Talents

“Strengths” Class puts focus on Creativity

SILVER SPRING, MARYLAND, June 11, 2009 Tenth-graders Michael McDonald and Noah Jones Drayton knew exactly what they wanted to do for their class project at the Siena School: They were going to make a movie starring Godzilla, the iconic Japanese film monster that crushed cities and battled other creatures.

They chose the activity for their "Strengths" class, a pass-fail course in which students at the private school in Silver Spring devise projects that cater to their interests and hobbies and present the results to classmates.

"When we were kids, we watched cartoons, and a lot of the stuff we watched was originally Japanese films. 'Godzilla' really was the first film that brought to life dinosaurs and monsters," McDonald explained to a group of Siena students during a presentation last week.

Instead of a film, however, the students presented Drayton, dressed in a Godzilla costume made of carpet foam and duct tape and painted a dull green, as McDonald explained how making the monster had proved formidable.

"As we were working on it, we were finding out that the costume was taking up too much time, and we really needed to concentrate on the costume," McDonald. "Hopefully, next year, we'll be able to get the whole thing done."

After the presentation, McDonald said he and his partner learned valuable lessons as they dealt with problems securing the materials they needed.



Fifth-grader Naveh Berner-Kadish plays "Moonlit Nights," a song that he composed for one of his most supportive fans, his grandmother

"We just sat down and said, 'You know, this might be what we need to focus on if we want it to be the best we can do,' " he said, adding that the pair learned about setting reasonable expectations. "Take small steps to reach a goal. You don't want to rush, to make it the best you can be."

Learning time management and how to adapt are some of the goals of the Strengths class, which is part of the experiential learning process at the 63-student school. Located in the lower level of the Montgomery Hills Baptist Church, the school serves college-bound students in grades 4-12 with mild to moderate language-based learning disabilities, such as dyslexia.

School officials said that allowing students to tap into their passions to create projects provides opportunities to learn academic and life skills, such as perseverance and flexibility. Some of the projects also enable students to explore career options.

Middle and high school students complete projects each semester. Fourth- and fifth-graders complete one project each year. This year's varied projects included the creation of a working model of a lighthouse, a photography exhibit and the compilation of an album mapping out arrangements for a wedding by a student interested in event planning.

"The whole point of this course is what are you interested in versus an assigned project of picking a topic you may or may not like," said Eric Heyer, the school's founder and executive director. "It's the first time that they discover that hard work and perspiration can be enjoyable."

"Students make decisions all the time" concerning their projects, said Clay Kaufman, assistant head of the school. For McDonald and Drayton, encountering obstacles with the costume "helps them realize how much more complicated things are than just reading a book," Kaufman said.

Tenth-grader Ally Nau decided to challenge herself by taking a design of lines and circles that she liked to scribble on paper and turning it into a wall mural done in black marker. The expanded design included geometric figures, a peace sign, clouds and raindrops.

"Doing the mural is the most I've ever done with my art," Nau told her fellow students during her presentation, in which students saw slides of her working on the mural on an art room wall.

She said later that completing the project has piqued her interest in doing an even larger drawing of her designs, which include symbols that are important to her. "Everything I do, it is representative of me in some way," Nau said. "For my personality, I'll draw a sun to show I'm a happy person."

For Naveh Berner-Kadish's presentation, the fifth-grader played "Moonlit Nights," a song lasting just over a minute that he composed to play on his saxophone.



"It doesn't look that complicated," Naveh said as he showed students the sheet of music that he'd written. "But when you hear it, it is. It may squeak at the beginning, but it will get better at the end."

Naveh, who sported a purple bandana wrapped around his head and played a saxophone half his size, said the song took more than two months to compose. He wrote it for his grandmother because she told him he is her favorite composer.

"It sounded good, but not like one of those songs you'll see by those really fancy artists," he said.

Sixth-grader Jason Karner indulged his interests in lighthouses and model building by researching the 1999 move of the Cape Hatteras lighthouse in North Carolina's Outer Banks and building a five-foot-tall working reproduction.

Jason shared his extensive research charting the progress of the move in a PowerPoint presentation. At the end, he turned on the light at the top of the lighthouse, which he built from air ducts and materials purchased at a hardware store. "I just thought it would be really cool to build a lighthouse. I already had the skills, and that's why I did it," Jason said after his presentation, noting that he had previously built a model train. "'Strengths' is something you either really like or you're really good at."

Despite the obstacles McDonald and his partner faced with their Godzilla costume, the budding videographer said he is looking forward to making a movie next year. The students have painted some boxes to be used as buildings in the film.

"I love Strengths because you get to focus on the thing you want to do in life and what you're interested in," McDonald said. "And you can show off your talents."

About The Siena School

The Siena School is an outstanding new private school in Silver Spring, MD serving bright, college-bound students with language-based learning needs, such as dyslexia. Siena's staff and board of advisors include distinguished national, State and local education leaders and professionals. The school opened September 2006 to serve students in grades 5 – 9, and now serves grades 4 – 12. Siena's program is designed for students with mild to moderate learning needs who are experiencing a discrepancy between their academic achievement and intellectual abilities in one or more areas such as reading, writing, oral expression or math. Siena delivers a highly unique and individualized educational program featuring small class sizes, research-based instructional methodologies, a highly trained staff and an educational environment uniquely designed to meet the needs of our students. For further information, The Siena School can be contacted at (301) 592-0567 or on the web at www.thesienaschool.org.

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