

Visual Arts program introduces students to all elements of reading



Jessica Selby/Daily Times

Left: Illustrator Mary Jane Begin transforms a student's scribble into a drawing while giving the children a look at the world of illustration. Ms. Begin has done illustrations in such books as "R is for Rhode Island Red" and "The Wind in the Willows".

Right: Students had a chance to look at some of Begin's work, both on the drawing table and in published works.

Illustrator gives unique look at her world to school children

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COVENTRY — The second grade students at each of the elementary schools in Coventry received a special visit at their schools last week as part of Reading Month.

Mary Jane Begin, a well known illustrator for books such as “R is for Rhode Island Red,” and “The Wind in the Willows,” came to their schools to talk with the students about her career as an illustrator and the possibility of the students pursuing their dreams as an artists or what ever else their passions might be driving them towards.

During her visit at Tiogue School on Tuesday she showed the second grade students a slide show presentation of some of her unpublished illustrations and then asked for help from one of the students in the audience to play a game with the kids.

Providing no real instruction Begin simply asked her helper to draw a large scribble on an oversized easel she brought in

for the presentation. Following the request, the student did just that and then sat back down.

Begin then asked all of the students that had gathered for their input on what the helper’s scribbles actually looked like. Some said a snake, some said a bird, some said pants, some said a maze, some couldn’t see anything, but Begin helped them to create an actual image from the scribbles.

Together Begin and the students created an image of a bird like figure from the nonsense scribbles. Begin then explained to the students that often times what something seems like on the surface can be something much different if visually given some consideration.

The district art teacher for Coventry, Sarah Hemendinger, said that that was one of the main goals of bringing Begin into the school system. Hemendinger said that she applied for a grant through the VSA Arts of Rhode Island organization as a way of fostering reading through the visual arts and that by bringing the two elements together she hoped to achieve an ultimate goal with her students.

The organization obviously found merit in her proposal as they granted her the funding to support her proposed project for the first and second grade students in the Coventry School district.

“During reading month in April, we wanted to have our first and second grade students engage in hands-on visual arts projects that integrate reading,” Hemendinger said. “And we thought that having a professional artist come in to talk with the students about our proposed project would be the best way to kick off the project.”

How the project worked, Hemendinger explained, is that Begin was invited into the classrooms first to meet with the second grader students at each of the elementary schools in Coventry. During her visit she discussed with the students her insight into the world of illustration as well as inspired them to create illustrations of their own.

The student’s illustrations would actually be worked on during their regularly scheduled art classes, but would be based on what they learned from Begin’s visit. Once the drawings were completed, they would be mounted onto reusable canvass bags which would be used as “student reading bags.”

Each child would then be allowed to select an appropriate level reading book to place in their bag to read when they were finished with their classroom work.

“Research shows that the opportunity

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Illustrations enhance children's desire to read

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for all children to read a familiar book helps to promote fluency and that fluent readers are able to gain more comprehension from the material they are reading," Hemendinger said. "All of our first and second grade children across town will participate in this project and

we are very excited to play a small role in helping the children to become better readers through the arts."

In addition to this project, Hemendinger said that she also used a portion of the grant money to purchase a selection of Begin's books for inclusion into each of the elementary school libraries in the district.