

Sculpting the Face of Immigration

by George Zavala

THE NUMBER 7 TRAIN to Woodside, Queens, in New York City reveals the rich diversity of this community. From my transfer point at Grand Central Station, I am witness to the coming together of the mosaic that is Woodside. On the panoramic ride that takes me out of Manhattan, people from Asia, the Middle East, Central and South America, the Caribbean, Europe, the Baltics, and the Mediterranean sit side by side as the New York skyline passes behind them. When I learned of the diverse population at PS 11 in Woodside where students speak at least 50 languages, I was immediately excited at the prospect of working there.

I've worked as an art and theater consultant in New York for 10 years and this was the first time I was exposed to so many different cultures at once. My work at PS 11 was to create an art piece with the students based on their explorations of immigration in the city. After meeting with teachers and figuring out how to fit the work into the curriculum, the time frame, and how I'd run the sessions, we were ready to begin.

In Mrs. Katsulis's 4th grade class the children were studying early immigration to the city. After the first session when the children and I got to know each other, we discussed transforming the knowledge they had acquired about the early immigrant experience into a visual representation. This led to exploring symbols as a way to represent history, time, events. The class decided to show a connection between the early immigrants and the city today. After selecting the image of the Statue of Liberty holding a ship (early immigration) in one hand and the Brooklyn Bridge (the present) in the other, we discussed the possible art forms we could use to create this image. We considered murals, mobiles, collages, and sculptures. The children selected sculpture and so began our sculpting sessions.

To facilitate creating a successful sculpture within the time allotted, we decided to make a plaster craft body cast using a student volunteer who would pose as the Statue of Liberty. We secured Mrs. Katsulis's permission (the classroom was transformed into an art studio once a week, and plaster craft is a very messy medium), reviewed the process of constructing an armature, and we were off.

To create teamwork and group responsibility, we established four teams. The set-up team made sure all materials were taken out and distributed at the start of each session; the clean-up team put the materials away and restored the room to its original condition; the documentation team kept a written, illustrated, and photographic record of the entire process from the first to the last workshop; and the presentation team wrote an artists' statement about the work and was responsible for explaining the piece to other classes and in assemblies. These teams met before my visits and shared their progress with me during our sessions. The sense of ownership and pride in their work were evident in the excitement and energy the children demonstrated during the entire process. As we neared the end, the

documentation and presentation teams made periodic reports to the class and planning began for the unveiling and exhibition of the finished pieces.

Mrs. Velazquez's 4th grade bilingual class shared a similar experience. This class focused on recent immigration. The children chose to represent three Latino communities from Queens on each face of an Aztec pyramid sculpture. An American flag surrounded the pyramid, woven through plaster hands made from molds of the students' hands, and leading to the peak of the structure, where a hand held a map of Queens with stars dotting the places where recent Latino immigrants have settled.

Again we worked in teams and each session the children worked with enthusiasm, commenting on and offering suggestions at each stage of the project. Finally, we were ready to unveil the projects and each class planned the big event.

We displayed the finished project prominently in the classroom and later in different sites around the school. The presentation team read their artists' statement, and the class shared moments they had particularly enjoyed and things they had learned during the project. Amid refreshments and sweets we celebrated our work and said good-bye.

This is just one project of many that I have had the privilege of working on with the children and teachers of PS 11, and the support of the teachers and staff is always instrumental. I look forward to these workshops, and as I wrap up my participation in these projects and board the Number 7 train toward my home in Spanish Harlem, I am constantly moved by the faces of my fellow commuters, seeing in each of them the face of a child I have met and the knowledge of their people that they have given me. As an individual and as an artist I am richer because of this journey.

George Zavala, a visual and theater artist, has worked as an artist in residence in New York City public schools for over ten years. He often engages students in exploring community traditions and cultural identity as inspiration for their art work.