

## RSU 21 Art Festival fosters community, self-esteem



Mime Scot Cannon performed a show focused on anti-bullying and building self-esteem at Sea Road School.

Photo by Denise Dupuis

By Donna Buttarazzi

[dbuttarazzi@seacoastonline.com](mailto:dbuttarazzi@seacoastonline.com)

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**KENNEBUNK** - Sea Road School was buzzing with creativity last week as all 400 or so fourth- and fifth-graders in the district came together for a two-day Art Festival sponsored by the Education Foundation of the Kennebunks and the Bauman Family Foundation, a national foundation based in Washington, D.C. that supports the arts, education and social justice.

Artists from River Tree Arts in Lower Village put on a variety of workshops where the students gained hands-on experience in everything from metal-smithing and hand sewing to pottery, pastels and watercolors. Their art work will be on display at the Irvine Art Gallery at River Tree Arts from Sept. 30 through Oct. 7. In the afternoon students experienced, and even participated in a performance art with a show focused on anti-bullying and building self-esteem from mime, Scot Cannon.

Sea Road School Principal Steve Marquis said district fifth-graders have been participating in programs at Heartwood School for a number of years.

"The Art Festival is an extension of that, and the concept for it was born from the success of the district Math Festival," Marquis said. Marquis said fourth- and fifth-graders from Mildred L. Day School, Kennebunkport Consolidated School, and Sea Road School were all mixed together into classes for the two day workshop with fourth-graders attending on Thursday and fifth graders on Friday.

"It created a great sense of community," Marquis said. "Kids were interacting with kids from different towns in the district that they might play ball with, but don't see in the school setting; it really showcased a partnership and a great feeling of community."

Marquis and Mildred L. Day School Principal Kevin Crowley played a game of pick-up football with the fifth-graders during recess on Friday, sharing some down time with their students together before the afternoon session.

Students were given a list of 13 different workshops to choose from, and they were asked to list five they would like to participate in. From those lists each student was put in two of the classes they were interested in. The hour long sessions featured artists from River Tree Arts teaching the workshops, and a host of school staff and parent volunteers kept the day running smoothly, Marquis said.

One of the morning sessions, a performance art workshop led by Cannon, fed into the afternoon presentation of "Open the Door" a bullying education and conflict resolution primer for elementary and middle schools. Marquis said staff put together a group of kids outgoing students willing to participate in the performance art class.

"We got a number of kids who were interested in performance art involved in this part of the festival," Marquis said.

Cannon uses his own childhood struggles growing up with a stuttering problem to teach children to communicate and show tolerance using pantomime, music and audience participation.

Students learned alternatives to the use of bullying or violence as an expression of anger when they're having a bad day.

"Open the door when you feel trapped inside of that masks that's keeping you sad. Open the door, let someone in, try talking instead of trying to win," Cannon and the students sang.

The students were mesmerized as their peers acted out skits that showed the choices they could use instead of hitting, pushing or calling someone a name. Cannon and the student actors also demonstrated how words sent in a text can be taken several different ways, and are hurtful when the meaning is misconstrued.

"Nobody knows how you are saying 'What's your problem?' when you text it," Canon said.

Six of the student performers acted out the emotions happy, sad, mad, shy, confused and proud to show the different emotions that are missing from typed comments.

"Think before you talk, and think before you click," Canon repeated. He emphasized talking and giving encouragement rather than making fun of someone.

"The most important thing you can do is communicate," Cannon told the audience. "Once you smile, and take time to talk or give encouragement you have a new friend."

Cannon's message of tolerance and communication supports what Marquis said is the goal of creating a positive environment for his students at Sea Road School.

"It's really about how do you make a school a better place. It's about greeting people with a smile. It's about reaching out in friendship. That's the number one thing we do here," Marquis said. "We talk about 'How do you make people feel better?'"

The art pieces created by the students will be taken back to River Tree Arts to be showcased at an exhibition in the Irvine Art Gallery Sept. 30 through Oct. 7, Monday through Friday, 10 a.m. to 5 p.m. and Saturday 10 a.m. to 4 p.m. The community is invited to view the work of the young artists.