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TEACHERS making a difference



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Helaine Yeskel

Residence: Irvine

Family: Husband John; sons Scott, 27, and Ross, 23

School: Art specialist at Tarbut V'Torah in Irvine

Helaine Yeskel likens the prepping of her presentations to that of a caterer. All the dishes and accompaniments are prepared in the back. Then, when it's time to serve, the carts begin rolling in and rolling out, one after another. In her world, though, art is the main course.

"Everything has to be orchestrated," she says of her high-energy position. "On any given day, it's like art aerobics because we don't have transition time here."

Yeskel is an art specialist at Tarbut V'Torah in Irvine. She works with the school's 350-plus elementary students, meeting with each class once a week for 45 minutes.

A row of more than 20 blue, plastic-coated smocks Velcroed at the tip of a tie hang in a row below a window. Nearby are recently completed art projects, ranging from leaf-shaped ceramic bowls to drawings of fruit.

"My big push is that they see, that they don't draw or paint what's in their head. I really push their observational skills," she says. "I think it makes them more conscious of what's around them."

The art educator, who is also responsible for creating the scenery for the school's productions, is always on the lookout for items to bring into the classroom. From shells and palm tree leaves gathered while walking on the beach to saving the unused ends of celery sticks for the students to paint with while making homemade chicken soup – if something inspires her, she finds a way to get it and use it.

This year marks Yeskel's fifth year at the private, Jewish school. Prior to that, she served 17 years in early childhood education, 10 of which she taught kindergarten students through art alongside the lead teacher. Despite her experience and knowledge in the field, the Irvine resident, who holds a bachelor's degree in fine arts from George Washington University, continues to keep up to date with trends and current research. A member of the National and California Association of Art Education, she receives journals and regularly attends conferences and workshops.

Such enthusiasm, along with talent and dedication, has earned national and local recognition for Yeskel and her students. For the past four years, the educator has been on the Honor Role of Teachers at the Laguna Arts Festival, where many of her students were juried among thousands to participate in the prestigious art show.

For Yeskel, though, it's not about winning contests. It's about building confidence and appreciation.

"They need time in their day to just kind of unwind. Not that I'm an easy art teacher," says Yeskel. "But I think it's important for kids to just kind of look around and appreciate the beauty in the world." □

- By Sandy Bennett

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