

Into Their Own Hands

Lorienne Solaski

Editor's note: As a resident of Hastings-on-Hudson, New York, I regularly get online updates from village government and the school district's newsletter. Having taught in the district for 15 years, I'm always eager to hear how my "old" department is doing. This fall I got a newsletter that featured the art department's ceramics teacher – and I was thrilled by the project that was profiled. Lorienne faced what is probably one of the most challenging art teacher situations – how to conduct a remote ceramics class. I thought her inventive solutions, though it involved extensive preparation, were great examples of how we overcome the seemingly insurmountable obstacles the pandemic has generated. We art teachers are resourceful, persistent, and successful.

We've bracketed the published article about Lorienne's story with an introduction and reflection in her own words.

Leaving the classroom abruptly in March was jarring and disorienting for educators and students alike. Yet it was in my ceramics classes that I felt the greatest loss. Without access to clay, glaze, sculpting tools, pottery wheels, or a kiln, I reluctantly pivoted into a sculptured-based curriculum. Students began making 3D sculptures out of paper, tinfoil, recycled materials, and even bread dough. While my students persevered through an unprecedented spring semester, I felt their disappointment about losing access to clay, a studio space, and the many projects they had started.

During the summer of 2020, fellow educators and I spent our time hypothesizing and planning for an unpredictable upcoming school year. I was unsettled by the idea of continuing to teach ceramics in an entirely remote environment. I joined Art Educator facebook groups that were sharing ideas and plans for the upcoming school year including: "Online Art & Design Studio Instruction in the Age of 'Social Distancing'" and "High School Ceramics." I came across videos of other ceramic teachers who were assembling ceramic kits for their students to bring home, and I was moved to action. I knew that as the 2020-21 school year began, I could not provide my students the comfort of a traditional school year, but I would give them clay and the ability to work on projects regardless of where they were learning.

Here is the full article, reprinted from the issue of *Hastings Happenings* December 14, 2020 by Jason Platzner, Hastings-on-Hudson UFSD Public Relations Office.

Taking Matters into Their Own Hands: High School Students Create Ceramics at Home



Teacher Lorienne Solaski poses next to some of her students' ceramics work.

When Hastings High School teacher Lorienne Solaski saw the COVID-19 pandemic changing how her ceramics class students learn, she took matters into her own hands and put clay into theirs.

Since her ceramics course requires materials that are not readily available at home, Solaski took time during the summer months to create clay-making kits for her students to take home. The kits enabled the students to fully experience the Ceramics I course regardless of whether they were attending class in a hybrid or fully remote environment.

"None of the kids had access to clay or glazing," she said. "Ceramics is an all hands-on activity and all the materials are in the room."



One set of home kits in progress. I found that in some cases DIY clay tools were safer and much more affordable to send home. My favorite being PVC pipe rolling pins and fishing line with washers on each end for wire cutters.

Although students have missed the social interaction that comes with always working together in the studio, there are benefits to working on their own.

"I've found craftsmanship this year to be really high and I've seen more unique projects than years before," she said. "I think the amount of time they're taking to refine projects; the work has been more personal, and they have added in more of themselves, especially when they are at home and not influenced by people around them."



Mira Hinkaty
Grade 9



Emma Leddy
Grade 10



Bianca Arnon
Grade 9



Sawyer Dolgins
Grade 9



Tea Whitehorse
Grade 11

The pieces above are coil vessels in progress. Students posted images of their greenware-in-progress throughout the semester so Ms. Solaski could keep track of progress and assess technique and understanding.

Solaski said that since she provided the kits, she has found more and more of the students using them after school, working with the extra equipment in their free time.

"What's great about having clay at home is that they have this material now and they are able to make their own projects after they finish the ones that are for school," she said. "A couple of them have made their own things that weren't part of the assignment."

With students now submitting their finished pieces of work, Solaski said the results speak for themselves and the

Armed with their artisanal take-home kits, students could complete their projects from home. However, Solaski said that distributing the take-home kits was not as simple as it seemed. Given the possibly hazardous nature of clay dust, she had to make sure the students could keep themselves and their homes safe.

"That was a huge endeavor. I had to have certain safety measures that everyone understood before sending the kits home," she said. "But it was worth it because the only way to learn ceramics is by doing it with your hands."

So far, Solaski said, the project is going really well. There are even some unexpected benefits. "It's a nice hands-on activity for the students to do when they are at home and on a screen all day," she said. "I think that it's therapeutic for a lot of students."

Solaski has also noticed a change in the artistic process.

students are speaking up about how ceramics at home gives them the time to unwind from other subjects.

"It is kind of a recharging class for other academic periods because it is an active physical activity working with and manipulating materials," she said. "There aren't many classes where they are getting that experience."

Solaski said she is overjoyed at the success of her kits and also hopes that they have shown her students the option of taking up the clay outside of school to continue their ceramics work long after the class is completed.

"Of course, we have kilns in the school but there are also ones in the community," she said.

"It's something they can continue to do at home now if they want to."



Emma Korz
Grade 12



Raneen Badeen
Grade 12



Emma Korz
Grade 12



Kate McDermott
Grade 9

Examples of finished student work

Sending clay home with students did not come without its challenges. Like many districts in the United States, our high school operated on a hybrid model in which students came in two-three days per week and then participated virtually on the remaining days. Projects were presented in sets of two, so that there was an at-home project and an in-school project and students could switch back and forth between the two.

Once students completed projects at home they had to transport their greenware back to the school for firing, which they were able to do at the end of the school day, or on days when they were coming to school for in-person instruction.

Hastings-on-Hudson is a small town so many students are able to walk to school or catch a very short ride from a family member, but I can imagine this sort of arrangement would be more confusing on a larger scale. Over the course of the semester students learned the hard way how fragile their greenware was – there were a number of ceramic casualties.

"I decided that all glazing would be done in the classroom because choosing colors, transferring them into smaller containers, and then keeping track of the colors and types, seemed inefficient and costly.

I found early communication with students and parents was key to ensuring the semester would run smoothly. I sent a [letter](#) to all students and families during the first week of school that outlined the expectations of the upcoming class they were registered for and some of the risks and inconveniences associated with bringing clay into their homes, the most significant of these being that dry clay dust is harmful when inhaled and clay should never be disposed of in your household sinks.

I was thrilled to see what my students have been able to create at home and the responsibilities they were able to navigate while they were maintaining their own home/workspaces. I found myself drawn to their progress photos even more than their finished work. Several students spent the warmer months working outdoors, and photos revealed makeshift work studios on patio furniture surrounded by backyards and trees. Students also worked from garages,

bedrooms, and kitchen tables nestled among family members and pets. While the boundary between school and home was further eroded, I was comforted by the fact that students were successfully working with clay and spending quiet, devoted time sculpting and hand-building. I also noticed that certain students were far more productive and engaged when they worked on pieces at home, isolated from the distractions of the classroom.

"Since everything is online, I never create anything tangible in school. We're even missing the concreteness of printing out a completed essay to hand in. For this reason, working with my hands to create ceramic pieces is therapeutic. I'm able to create something real that I can use, which reminds me that there is more than the virtual world we're living in."

Sophie Mainero, Grade 12



I would like to thank and recognize Janna Dewan, an art teacher at Cape Elizabeth High School in Maine who shared a brilliantly thorough “Clay Safety at Home” document on the High School Ceramics Facebook group. I relied heavily on this document when creating my own ceramic kits and troubleshooting how to safely provide students with clay at home. I am also incredibly grateful to all of the ceramic teachers who provided videos, photos, and advice on the Facebook groups mentioned above. Witnessing how the art education community has been able to pivot to digital instruction over the past year has been overwhelming and inspiring and I am proud to be part of this community.



Lorienne Solaski is in her second year teaching Ceramics and Art in the Hastings-on-Hudson School district (7-12). Before officially entering the classroom, she spent two years working as an outdoor educator with international school students in Hong Kong and South China.

Prior to becoming an educator, Lorienne worked as a ceramic fabricator for SKT ceramics, an assistant curator at NYU Langone Medical Center, and guide for Creative Time’s 2011 exhibition, “Drifting in Daylight” in Central Park. She received her Masters in Art Education from Rhode Island School of Design in 2018. You can reach her at solaskil@hohschools.org

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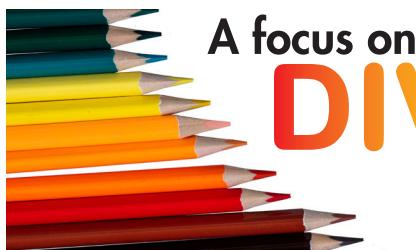
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DIVERSITY & INCLUSION



Middle school seeks to support students of color

By Jason Platzner

The Hastings-on-Hudson school district now has a group designed to ensure that middle school students of color feel seen, heard, empowered and supported.

"It provides a free space where they won't have to worry about censoring themselves because we share a common identity," said Jada Dickens, a math teacher at Hillside Elementary School and one of the faculty advisors of the group at Farragut Middle School.

The FMS Affinity Group provides a safe space for students to talk about their experiences and openly share their feelings with others who may share the same beliefs and viewpoint. The group meets virtually, after school.

Although there is an affinity group in the high school, Dickens said it is important to provide the same atmosphere for middle school students. Having participated in an affinity group when she was in high school herself,



Raquel Reid-McFarlane (left) and Jada Dickens are faculty advisors to an "affinity group" of students of color in the Hastings-on-Hudson school district. The middle school students have conversations "about who they feel they are as a person," according to Reid-McFarlane. ♦ Photo courtesy of the Hastings-on-Hudson Union Free School District

Dickens said, she wished she had the option earlier.

"It was middle school that I really needed it," she said. "By the time they get into high school it's almost too late for us to have that conversation about who they feel they are as a person."

"Students oftentimes don't know where they fit in," said advisor Raquel Reid-McFarlane, a fifth grade teaching

assistant at the middle school. "The whole idea of the group is having a sense of belonging."

The advisors noted that the group intends to allow middle school students from grades five to eight a place to hold discussions with their peers who may differ in age but share similar identities. The goal of the group is to allow the students the chance to make

connections that they may not make in school otherwise.

The advisors also act as a bridge between administration and the faculty, allowing students to come to them if they ever feel marginalized or uncomfortable. Dickens said that allowing students to have conversations at a younger age may give them more confidence in and out of school.

"It is a place for them to gain tools," added Dickens. "It's important to have these conversations and to provide them with support."

The group began meeting in January. With students more engaged in conversation about current events and the tumultuous times of the nation, both advisors said that now is the most important time to allow their students' voices to be heard.

"These kids are affected by what happens in the nation," said Dickens. "It's not just high school students, these students know what's going on as well."

Jason Platzner is public relations and communications specialist for the Hastings-on-Hudson Union Free School District.

If we learned anything from last year, it's that being together matters.



We got reminded,

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Super Bowl Champion Ali Marpet Looks Back on Time at Hastings High School



Hastings High School graduate Ali Marpet on the gridiron during Super Bowl LV.

When Hastings High School graduate Ali Marpet took to the football field at Super Bowl LV earlier this month, he wasn't thinking about winning. As an offensive lineman he knows his position is an important part of the Tampa Bay Buccaneers arsenal. A team player since his high school sports days, he passed most of the credit to the rest of the Buccaneers squad for their second Super Bowl championship win.

"I have a job to do so I need to be so focused on what the task at hand is," he said. "I focused on my job and let Mike Evans and Tom Brady and plenty of those guys do the rest."

For Marpet, it has been a long and distinctive journey to the NFL, a journey that he believes had its beginning at Hastings High School. Although his talents speak for themselves, he acknowledged the community and school's influence on his success today.

"I think my path to get here is pretty unique and a very specific set of circumstances," he said.

"The coaches and my environment at Hastings had a very large impact on that."

Looking back on his high school years, Marpet recounted how he had stopped playing football in freshman year to focus on a different sport. The surprising move caught the attention of coach Robert McCann who willingly gave Marpet advice on his approach to athletics in school and out.

"I was just going to focus on basketball because that was more interesting and I thought I had a chance of playing D3 basketball in college," he said. "Mr. McCann convinced me that playing multiple sports would make me a better basketball player and I think that it was bringing me back to football is what led to where I am now."

For McCann, who never actually coached Marpet on the field, the advice is an adage he uses for his students to this day and relayed all the credit for Marpet's journey back to him.

"My big thing to all of my athletes is not to neglect everything else," said McCann. "The nudge from me might have helped but all the credit goes to him."

During the Super Bowl, McCann and several of Marpet's former coaches and teachers watched anxiously as he took to the gridiron. Marpet said his path to the top during a pandemic was demanding with playing and practicing while adhering to new regulations.

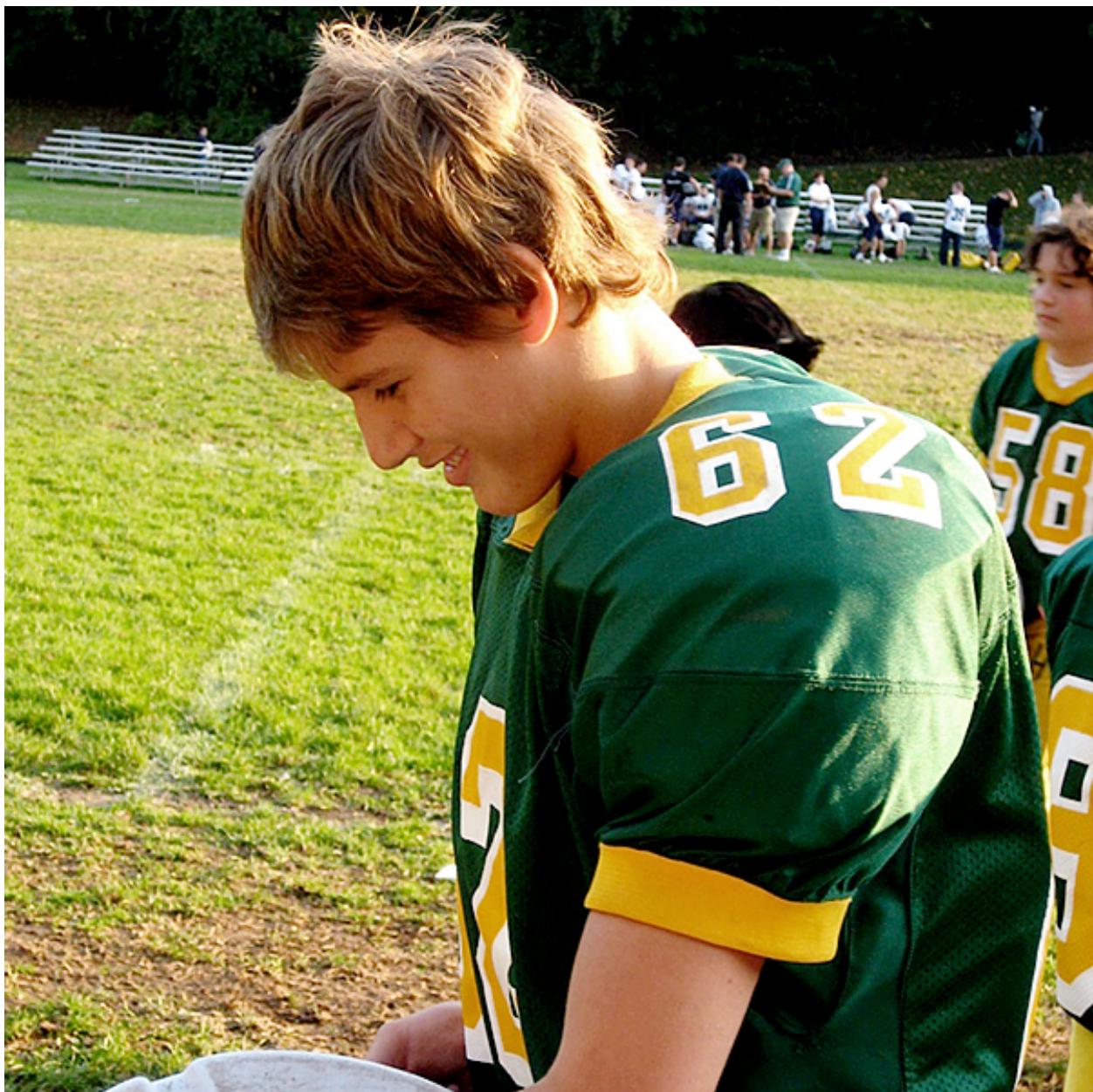
"There's been a lot of decisions that I have had to make that weren't easy to prioritize football," he said. "Specifically with this season, limiting your contact with people and taking COVID tests everyday, sometimes twice a day, it was really a grind for a while."

Battling the defending champions, the Kansas City Chiefs, Marpet and the Buccaneers became the victors with 31-9 at the end of the game. With his hard work in mind, Marpet said the pay off was that much more rewarding.

"At the end it feels worthwhile," he said. "After winning the superbowl you won't regret working too hard."

Now a Super Bowl champion, Marpet still looks back fondly on the steps from Hastings High School to the NFL, admiring the uniqueness of Hastings and its tight knit community. For the students in Hastings, Marpet said that many messages come to mind. His advice for any budding athletes back home was similar to that of McCann's during his freshman year.

"I think that one thing is really relevant is there's so much specialization in the sport people think that they need to play one sport year-round," he said. "I'd say play as many sports that are interesting to you, feel what sticks and feel what's right."



Ali Marpet on the field for Hastings High School.