

## Our People: The Art of Making Anything Possible

**Jessica Kibel brings a sense of color and community to the children of Irvington.**

*Esther Samra for The Hudson Independent*

If you happen to be near an unpainted wall at Dows Lane School in Irvington, watch out. It could be covered with painted fruit baskets or trees by morning. Who is the person bringing so much vibrant color to the school? The woman running around with a paintbrush in her hands is Irvington parent Jessica Kibel.

Before school ended last June, Kibel organized a cafeteria makeover with the help of the third grade and parent volunteers. She wanted to make the cafeteria a more inviting space by erasing the doleful green that had permeated the walls for so many years and by filling it with color.

After securing her labor force as well as a PTSA grant, Kibel set to work and drew freehand a cornucopia of fruits and vegetables. Every morning for 10 days, a class came down and painted, each child concentrating hard on pineapples or potatoes, and enjoying, literally, the fruits of their collective labor.

For Kibel, who has three children, sharing her talent is both an act of generosity and a civic imperative. As a child in a military family, Kibel moved frequently and attended more than 13 schools; establishing community was always a challenge. Kibel's mother implanted volunteerism as a virtue: "All of us have to give back, even if you don't have a lot to give."

When Kibel moved to Irvington, she began working with her daughter's first-grade class: she taught the children to sew, and together they made pouches and pencil cases and learned patiently the difficult task of making a buttonhole. They learned how to observe the world through fabric, thread and notions, and while they learned dexterity and enhanced their fine motor skills, the children also mentored one another, and worked seamlessly as a community.

Kibel also ran a recess art club in which the children created colorful paper mache piñatas and giant paper tissue flowers. During these sessions, many skills were taught, and, again, the children instructed one another. They learned how to take an abstract idea and make it concrete and how to be creative using humble materials such as newspaper, glue and water. "When you make the rules clear and expect the best, the kids will always rise to the challenge," Kibel said.

By the time Kibel envisioned the cafeteria mural project, she had extensive experience working with the third grade. She discussed the cafeteria project with two “ambassadors” from each class who in turn relayed the information to their peers so that when the students arrived in the cafeteria, they each knew what to do.

“I wanted every child to participate as much as they could,” Kibel said. “There was room for everyone to do something.” Kibel even made sure that one child, who uses a wheelchair, was lifted up to the scaffold to paint. “Everyone should know that they contributed to the whole. It’s something they will remember even after they leave Dows Lane,” Kibel said.

Painting the mural gave the children a way to communicate with no external pressures. “Kids are awesome,” Kibel said. “They are smarter than we are and they have no fear. They set their own standards and work together so well.” The students shared ladders, took turns and worked cheerfully within their allotted time. In an atmosphere of serious concentration, there were constant instances of one student spontaneously helping another.

As Kibel flitted back and forth between the children while they were painting, she would sing with joy: “There are no mistakes, only happy accidents.”

One aspect of the project that the children did not share in was cleaning up. Kibel wanted them to have as much painting time as possible and so she and the parent volunteers cleaned up after every session. “I didn’t want the kids to lose even one minute of fun,” she said.

The finished mural is a buoyant expression of healthy foods. Patrick Daly, one of the third-grade participants, said, “Mrs. Kibel taught us that anything was possible.”

In an era in which students have so much done for them, and are measured against rigid standardized educational goals, Jessica Kibel’s art projects send refreshing messages: It’s important to make beautiful things; it’s important to give children the opportunity to learn hands-on by doing and it’s important to build community by having fun.

Kibel is probably at work, even as you read this column, sketching her next project: a huge outdoor mural symbolizing the Hudson River, whose banks meet Dows Lane School.

*Esther Samra is a resident of Tarrytown, and one of Jessica Kibel’s parent volunteers.*

September 12, 2007 in [Our People](#) | [Permalink](#)