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Project in memory of young artist benefits many Pomona students

Monica Rodriguez, Inland Valley Daily Bulletin
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Jody Siegler talks to Pomona Unified School District Superintendent Richard Martinez at American Museum of Ceramic Art in Pomona. Jody and Scott Siegler are supporting a program that involves getting young people from Pomona to the museum and giving them a chance to work with clay. (Thomas R. Cordova Staff Photographer)

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Throughout the fall, more than 850 Pomona Unified School District students have made their way to the American Museum of Ceramic Art where they had a chance to see the exhibits and try their hand at creating pieces of art.

The visits have been made possible through Jody and Scott Siegler who have worked with the museum to create the Teens at the Wheel fund, which pays for bus transportation, materials and the instructor that makes the whole experience possible, said Angie Reyes, the museum's education manager.

The field trips, along with the Teens at the Wheel fundraiser, and the donation of a collection of more than 100 pieces of Weil Ware ceramic pieces and accompanying archival photos are all part of memorializing Julia



Park West High School students from left, Zach Lopez, Juan Mendoza, both 18, Evelyn Lopez, and Alondre Franco, both 17, make plates out of clay at American Museum of Ceramic Art in Pomona on Dec. 14. (Thomas R. Cordova Staff Photographer)

Cukier Siegler. She died in 2010 after she was hit by two vehicles as she was crossing a West Los Angeles street to get to her school bus.

Julia, 13, enjoyed working with clay and had demonstrated a growing talent for ceramic art.

Jody Siegler said she exposed her daughter to ceramics from an early age as a way for her learn using her five senses.

"There was the touching of the clay (and) the physicality of it," Siegler said.

Close to a year ago Siegler approached museum representatives and spoke to them about donating a large collection of the ceramic Weil pieces, made by Weil Ware of California, an important Southern California manufacturer of pottery and ceramics.

Discussions involving the

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donation led to talk about funding for a youth program that included giving them an opportunity to work with clay and from there the fundraiser to assist schools in transporting students to the museums.

The pilot project has been so successful, Siegler and her husband recently contributed \$5,000 to the Teens at the Wheel fund to help Pomona Unified students visit the museum in 2013.

The hands-on component of the project was critical to Siegler.

Working with clay could provide a young person with a chance to see if he, like her daughter, has a passion for ceramics, Siegler said.

"Maybe the wind will rush in for someone for ceramics," she said.

Seeing the museum collection, including some of Julia's work, combined with working with clay could spark an interest in ceramics and show them they can create "something that is placed in a glass case one day," Siegler said.

Creating something gets students excited, said David Armstrong, the museum's founder and president.

"It's something I think interests children at the grade school level and the high school level," he said. "It's an opportunity to enjoy and appreciate art."

The museum visits are broken up into parts dedicated to different activities including a tour of the facility and its exhibits and a discussion involving the Millard Sheets mural, "Panorama of Pomona," in the museum which depicts the history of the city.

Nancy Fegert, a social studies teacher at Park West High School, served as a chaperon when a group of students from across the campus visited the museum recently.

"It was such a positive experience," she said.

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Some were absorbed by a video on a particular type of Mexican ceramic art while others were interested in the Sheets mural and its tie to local history.

Others, including a student who has strong artistic abilities, were drawn to the creation of art pieces.

"He loves ceramics," Fegert said, adding the student spoke of his desire to work in ceramic arts one day.

"They got so inspired," she said, in addition to walking away proud of the city they live in.

Students are able to mold clay by hand and try using a potter's wheel, said Angie Reyes, the museum's education manager.

Students get to see the entire process of creating a ceramic piece.

"This is a very unique program," Armstrong said. "Most museums don't have the facilities to fire work and follow through the complete process."

Students may have tried their hand working with colorful modeling compounds sold in toy stores but it's not the same as working with real clay that comes from the Earth, he said.

As a result of the museum visits teachers have been inspired to do ceramic art projects at their schools, Reyes said.

For those interested in doing such projects but who lack the necessary training the museum has offered to train them, she said.

Last month Siegler and museum representatives spoke with Pomona Unified Superintendent Richard Martinez and asked if the district could assist by providing district students with transportation to the museum.

Martinez said that's something that will be explored as district personnel work on assembling the 2013-2014 academic year's budget.

"In the (2013-2014) we would definitely consider this in visual and performing arts," Martinez said. "It's a great museum with a lot of opportunities."

He praised Armstrong for his work and willingness to accommodate the needs of the district teachers and students.

Since her daughter's death Siegler has become an advocate for improving school bus stop safety, work that can be grueling.

Her support for the museum and the student clay experience is different.

"It's a gentler kind of work," she said, adding it allows her to engage with young people.

"It's part of continuing the parenting in some way," she said.

"I'm doing this and I get to surround myself with what is absent from my own life," she said.

Siegler said she'd like to see the fund grow and other contribute to it so more young people will be able to learn about ceramic art.

Contact Monica [via email](#), by phone at 909-483-9336 or on Twitter [@PomonaNow](#).

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