Learning Resource Spotlight: Chris Lewis

Chris Lewis, K-5 arts teacher and other half to K-1-2 teacher Betsy Lewis, teaches all ten K-5 classrooms every week from the arts den he’s created within the school’s pool house. Chris ushers kids in long enough for them to shrug off coats (this winter), then join a short meeting where he either sets them on their in-progress tasks and creations or guides them in their next activity. Then the fun begins...

Ask anyone who has taken art classes from Chris – there are 28 years of them since he began at the red schoolhouse on Quebec/13th Avenue in 1987 – and they’ll recall classes filled with discovery, imagination, problem-solving, mistakes and adjustments and more discovery. They’ll describe the creations Chris helped them bring to life – usually things many of us parents would never allow to swallow up our living rooms or basements: From homemade marble runs, to found-materials mobiles to quarter-mile box tunnels, all painted, covered, bedecked and entirely kid-designed and developed. His students also recall making music: with guitars, basses, drums home-made and store-bought. Their compositions are not usually of the cover-band variety, but kid-created and experimental.

Chris’s creativity is truly who he is; it doesn’t stop when he heads home. Trained as an art major and psychology minor at CU, Chris is a sculptor and metal worker. He’s a working painter and well, artist who just completed a large series of paintings. Currently, he’s building a life-size, lifelike Lamborghini out of cardboard. Why? “I sold the ’67 Camaro I grew up with, and I regretted it ever since,” says Chris. “Originally I decided I’m going to build a car, and put it in the back of a pickup truck and drive it downtown and park it in a parking spot, wait for a traffic guy to come, and see what happens. The thing about having a cardboard car,” says Chris, “is you can put it on top of a school building, say, and take a picture of it, or you can do” ... and he’s just getting started.

The car concept is the illusion of reality. The Lamborghini Chris is working on in his basement started with his desire to build a moving motor. “I had to do the motor.” And now he’s finished the engine block including pistons that work and move inside the cylinder. “When I brought the wheel to school, the kids asked to take it apart and reassemble it. They loved it – they can take the disks and caliper out – and it made me realize I can make this car, which can be completely disassembled andreassembled.”

Chris (and Betsy) knew each other in Cleveland, where Chris attended what he describes as a very chichi high school. He traveled here for college and never looked back – discovering later that Betsy made the same move. After college, Chris worked as a counselor at a psychiatric hospital, first with adults and later with adolescents. When Betsey began working at Stanley, she asked Chris to ‘do art with her class.’ At the time, Carolyn’s classroom was right next door. “She asked me to be an intern,” says Chris, “so I tried out, and was an intern for a year before there was an intern program.” At that time, Stanley didn’t have an art teacher, so Chris wrote up a concept for the art program. Teachers thought they had art covered ... “So I came up with an alternative, a supplement for what couldn’t be covered in the classrooms: woodworking, big painting projects that were collaborative among all the school’s kids, clay.” Chris got a kiln, construction tools and began to create the imagine-design program you see today.

This week, students are working in clay – readying their own terra-cotta soldiers for firing in the kiln. Chris sets his curriculum for the year, leaving room for student-directed exploration and changes. For example, “Everyone’s got to make a clay soldier, but not everyone has to bury it in the yard for discovery later.” (Though there are caches of them from Chris’s students down the years, both here and at the 13th Avenue playground.) Every year includes clay, painting, woodworking, and lots of drawing, which he says is really important.
“I make sure everyone experiments with those during the year. I’ve taught for 20 million years,” he says. “In some ways, you want to make it more exciting for yourself, but I don’t feel like I’m restricted to the plan. I have all this other time where art can be about simply being creative.”

“The choices evolve as time goes by,” he continues. “The box maze in past years is great because students like to build it then play in it. But we’ve done marble runs, then sized up to tennis balls … there’s such a process, and student creations break down so much when they make everything with cardboard, tubes, PVC, tape, twine. That’s another way the creative process comes together: When something needs to be fixed to work properly.”

Chris’s approach to teaching art exemplifies what Stanley British Primary values: The 7 goals for learning – self awareness, collaboration, respect, curiosity, perseverance, academic resourcefulness and joyful, lifelong learning – he demonstrates it in his classroom, in his home life where he and his family (which includes at the center two high-school age Stanley graduates Daisy and Rosie) have created untold numbers of furnishings, playscapes, etc. Chris brings his individuality onto the soccer pitch or the basketball court, too. Whenever there’s an opportunity to do something creatively, there’s Chris.

But it’s not without discipline. Chris values the masters and the teachers and the technique. As an art student, he wanted to paint like the masters, to glaze colors, layer the medium as only the masters can do. With no Dali or DaVinci to teach him, he often found his way himself. And he knows that all kids have their own unique ways of being creative, of creating. “I always a struggle not to be stodgy,” he says. “I know artists who know how things should be done; they can’t resist telling students how, instead of letting them struggle a little bit.”

When asked what one thing represents Stanley to him, Chris goes straight for the lyrics of song he and his students wrote: “‘We learn in a unique way, we even learn when we play.’ I try to sum that up in the art program,” says Chris. “It’s about being excited and challenged and having to struggle a little to find the answer; not about being taught and having to do something over and over again. Instead, I ask the kids to use their hands and to come to their own conclusions. If you listen to the kids, they can steer you in the right direction.”