



## **Emotional Rebuilding: How San Diego’s Teachers Use Art to Help Children Cope With the Firestorm of 2003**

By Ondine Brooks Kuraoka, MSW

In late October 2003, San Diego’s children witnessed a relentless, fiery nightmare, scarier than any monster they could have imagined. As the firestorm raged on, parents wondered how their children would put it in perspective and regain their sense of safety.

Even as homes were being demolished by the flames, local teachers, school psychologists, and counselors began the heroic task of emotional rebuilding. Many chose to use art as a tool for the children to work through their fears and release the searing images burning in their minds.

Elisha Templeton teaches Kindergarten in Scripps Ranch at Jarabek Elementary, where 109 families and eight staff members lost their homes. Since none of the children in Templeton’s class lost their homes she didn’t assume they would draw about the fires. She encouraged them to draw whatever had happened for them that week, whether it was Halloween or the fires or anything else. Templeton was amazed by the intensity of their drawings.

One girl drew three small figures with screaming faces inside a wall of flames. When Templeton asked her about the picture, the five-year-old responded, “The girls are burning.” Her drawing was a bridge to fears that otherwise may not have been verbalized. Templeton was then able to talk to the girl about the fact that she was safe now, and assess whether the girl needed to talk to crisis counselors.

Other drawings showed blazing trees, fire trucks squirting water at houses, and families leaving their homes. Some Kindergarteners captioned their drawings. “13 people died in the fire.” “The firefighters washed the fire off.” “I was scared about my friends.” “The fire fighter is dead.” “This is ash, burn house gone.” The drawings showed “deep and profound thoughts and feelings. It was a powerful way to communicate,” Templeton said.

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At Tierrasanta Elementary, children were allowed time for free drawing. Kindergarten teachers Monetta Rustin and Tammy Barragan recalled depictions of a red sun, smoke, and darkness. “The children who had watched more TV had different drawings; they were much more vivid, with lots of houses burning,” Rustin remembered.

Barragan related, “One girl knew that a teenager and a firefighter had died, and she was really sad. She didn’t want to draw the fire; it was too much for her.” The teachers walked a line of sensitivity, being careful to respect each child’s needs in the moment. While some children were eager to release images and feelings onto paper, others weren’t ready, or found different creative outlets more helpful.

Kelly Vance-Estrada, a school psychologist with Cajon Valley Union School District, did a lot of creative work with the children at Crest Elementary. “We would also encourage the kids to do skits about their pictures.

“The younger kids might be able to draw their pictures but still not get their feelings out. So I would get a small group together, talk about their pictures of fire trucks, and then pull out some little fire trucks so they could act out what they saw.”

The children at Crest Elementary also found comfort in making scrapbooks about the firestorm. “Scrapbooking, putting together pieces of history, is the one thing that’s really bringing together kids who lost their homes and kids who didn’t. They’re creating this project together about a historical event,” Vance-Estrada beamed over the phone.

Almost every teacher interviewed mentioned the children’s compassion, which came through in the art. Vance-Estrada remembers a particularly stirring drawing of “a horse running out, flames behind him, [and] his eyes were red. The student said that that’s what she saw from her horse’s eyes as they were evacuating him. The drawing was very telling about her feelings and what the family had been through.”

Seventy-seven children from Crest Elementary lost their homes. Vance-Estrada noticed the children exhibiting different stages of grief as the weeks went by, and offered a variety of art projects to meet their needs.

“We did one project with the theme, ‘I feel safe when...’” she said. One child drew a picture of her grandfather’s house. Other themes included memories of how their houses used to be, and the way they want things to look a year from now. Some children drew the charred fields covered in wildflowers.

Vance-Estrada emphasized how sharing the art projects “gave them an opportunity to feel less isolated in their fears, and provided them an opportunity to be expressive, whereas maybe they didn’t want to speak out in class.”

To parents who want to use art to help their children through a frightening experience, Vance-Estrada urges giving the children permission for their feelings. She recommends saying, “It’s okay to be sad. It’s okay to draw that you’re angry. It’s okay to scribble up your paper and throw it in the trash. And it’s definitely important that the parents let their children know when Mom and Dad are sad.”

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Templeton asserts, “If it’s really going to be an expression, it has to be unencumbered by outside critique. The thing that makes it authentic is if somebody isn’t standing over them saying, ‘Did you mean to put the tree here?’ It’s a process; it’s not about finished, polished, perfect work.”

Jane Lee has been teaching for 31 years. She teaches Kindergarten at Flying Hills Elementary in El Cajon. She reminds parents, “Every day there’s something frightening for that little person... Sometimes [children] don’t know whether they’re allowed to express [certain fears] verbally. So by drawing, that leaves it up to the adults to inquire.”

Stephanie Jordan, a first grade teacher at Flying Hills, expressed a common thread of admiring the children’s resilience. “First they’re afraid, and then they process the information. They want to know why things happen. Then they express their feelings by drawing it out or talking it over, and they are usually calmed and relieved. It’s off their chests and they can move on.”

As San Diego continues to rebuild after the firestorm, our children are emerging from the experience as the creative, hopeful people they always have been.

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