

Artful respite from

Teacher offers clay as creative outlet at special-needs class

BY RACHEL WEISS

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Art teacher Gina Mars thought it would be fun to have her class create masks. But not the kind you'd wear over your nose and mouth to help slow the spread of coronavirus.

These were what she calls "Picasso masks." Using a slab of clay, the students cut out eyes, a nose and various geometric shapes to create a face reminiscent of the work of Pablo Picasso. "These projects are incredibly therapeutic," Mars said.

Mars, 54, of Huntington Station, works with individuals with special needs in her class, called "Clay Comes Alive!," twice a week at The Spirit of Huntington Art Center. Founded in 2011, the nonprofit organization is centered on igniting a passion for the arts in people with special needs and veterans, said executive director Michael Kitakis.

The organization also offers classes on fine art, which includes mediums such as paint and pastel, and music.



Amorita Snow from Glen Cove attends class with her son Ben Snow, 20, a special needs student, during a class at The Spirit of Huntington Art Center in Huntington Station on Thursday. Credit: Rande Daddona

"It does transform lives," Kitakis said. "We see it every day here." The courses went virtual during the pandemic, but Mars' clay class resumed with in-person sessions in June.

She said the students she works with come from all different backgrounds — some have learning disabilities, and others have coped with cancer.

Mars partnered with Spirit of Huntington this year. She previously

taught at the Nassau BOCES center in Greenvale, and is passionate about working with people with disabilities. She has a home studio as well. In person, Mars teaches four students at a time.

She said the pottery wheels are spread out in the classroom 6 feet apart, and that each student receives a face mask and shield. From a distance, Mars demonstrates the project for the day.

They've crafted bowls with clay

August 10, 2020

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Art teacher Gina Mars and her clay sculpture during her class at The Spirit of Huntington Art Center in Huntington Station, on Thursday. Credit: Rande Daddona

frogs popping out of them and mugs that depict "crazy monster faces," Mars said. "They're learning how to build things and they can always redo it, so it builds their confidence," she said.

Around March, Mars hosted these classes on Zoom for 40 students at a time. She would mail them their own kits that included clay, glazes and paint.

She would deliver instructions for the first steps of the project, then the students would drop off or ship their clay creations to Spirit of

Huntington. "I fire [the pottery] for them in the kiln, and then they come pick them up again in a socially distanced environment," she said.

Mars said the projects come with a sense of fulfillment for the artists in her class, which is especially important in these isolating times.

"These things go home, either to hang on the wall or to be used every day," she said. "Everything is food safe, so it makes people feel good to use things they actually made."

Mars said many of the individuals she works with are longtime students

"The feeling of touching the clay and building is very relaxing. The thing with clay is if you make a mistake, you can always fix it."

- Gina Mars

of hers, as she's been teaching art all over Long Island for 30 years. She feels her classroom can help students "forget the outside world" — for a few hours, all the students have to focus on is the clay in front of them.

And with this group of students, Mars believes she's found her niche in Spirit of Huntington.

"There's a harmony between teaching with clay and the students," Mars said. "It seemed effortless to work there and work with people who are truly getting something out of this."