

Creativity finds outlet in school's art classes

By Lee Strong
Senior staff writer

SENECA FALLS — Among the benefits of taking an art class that he could have cited, Kyle Fitzpatrick readily named one that might make most parents blanch at bath time.

"You get to get your hands messy," joked the first-grader at St. Patrick's School, 81 W. Bayard St.

Kyle then proudly displayed marker-stained fingers as he and fellow students colored cut-out, geometrically shaped pieces of Styrofoam plates which they would then press on paper to create pictures of robots.

The project is just one of many organized by Janet Kraus, who this year became the school's art teacher. Two days a week, Kraus holds sway in a room full of art books, art supplies and the artistic creations of students.

The St. Pat's youths learn the basics of art — basics that they might not have gotten just a year ago.

"Last year they'd just kind of tell us in the afternoon it's time for art," recalled sixth-grader Emil Bove. "Now we have it every week."

"We're learning how to do it," remarked Joseph Sorge, a fellow sixth-grader. "We're getting ideas how to do things."

St. Patrick's students have always had art class, noted Robert Edelman, the school's principal. But art was often taught when the school's teachers had time, and was sometimes somewhat irregular.

The students now have regular art classes, where they learn about art history and techniques, Edelman observed.

"I think the idea is to give the kids — many of whom have no background in art — the experience of doing art," the principal remarked.

That the school is able to offer such formal art classes is the result of a principal who was looking for ways to improve his school meeting a trained art teacher who was looking for a way to use her skills.

Last year, Kraus, a Seneca Falls resident, was substitute teaching while completing her master's degree in art education at Nazareth College of Rochester. She, however, wanted to work with students on a regular basis, so she met with Edelman and offered to give private art lessons to students after school.

A number of students took advantage of the lessons, and at the end of the 1991-92 school year they held an

exhibition, Edelman recalled. Parents who came to the exhibit were so impressed they suggested that the school offer an art program.

Edelman then hired Kraus to teach at the school on a part-time basis.

In addition to introducing the students to the basics of art and the works of famous artists, Kraus noted that she tries to integrate what she teaches with the students' overall education.

"I can't do it in all the courses," Kraus observed, "but I'm trying to implement in the art room what they are learning outside this room."

When, for example, she discovered that fourth-grade students were studying Native Americans, she had them make masks and ghost shirts. She even had them paint portraits of Indians. Many of these works are currently gracing the walls outside the school's main office.

Kraus is also beginning to ask the students to critique their own work — but only to point out the positives. That way, she said, they receive encouragement, and "when they go to museums they begin to have something to say."

As part of her attempts to encourage students, Kraus selects artists of the month who subsequently receive certificates and have their work put on display. The artists selected "don't have to be the most artistic, but they have to put in the effort," she said.

The art program is part of an overall effort to provide the students with more than just the basics, Edelman noted.

The school also offers an instrumental music program and has expanded its library program to help the students learn research skills.

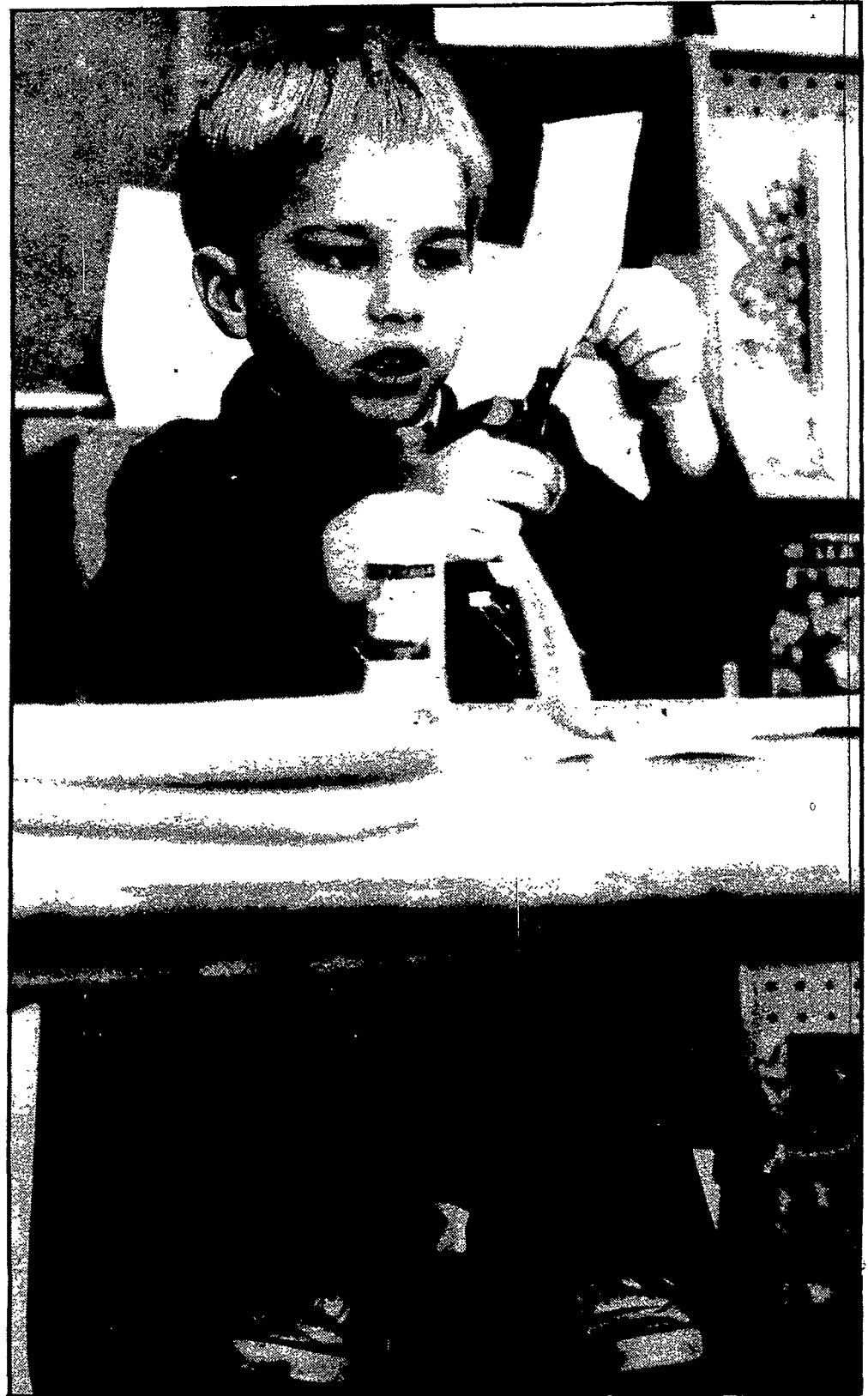
"We've been looking each year for ways to improve what we offer," Edelman said. But the art program has been the most extensive new or expanded program, he observed.

The fledgling program has served as a drawing card for the school, Edelman acknowledged.

"Parents are always talking about the work the kids are doing," Edelman said. And because the work is displayed, "it's being seen by the parents, the teachers and the people who come into the school."

Parents have also become involved in the program in a more direct way, Kraus observed.

"I have a scrounging committee," she explained with a laugh. Because her budget is limited, the "committee" helps her find materials to use in class.



S. John Wilkin/Photo intern
During art class Jan. 20, Michael Logan, a second-grader at St. Patrick's School in Seneca Falls, concentrates on cutting out a template to be used as a stamp for creating robot figures.

Thus wood chips from an area lumberyard sit waiting in a box soon to be used to make African masks. Large cardboard sheets are propped against a table waiting to be made into caves, where the students will do their own versions of primitive cave paintings.

Because this is the program's first year — and the first time many of these students have had art in any formal way — she has been taking things slowly, Kraus said. She hopes to

expand the program in the future, challenging the students further and integrating it even more with their other classes.

Nevertheless, Kraus observed, "The students are doing very well. They do get frustrated trying to push themselves further because they need to think in a new way."

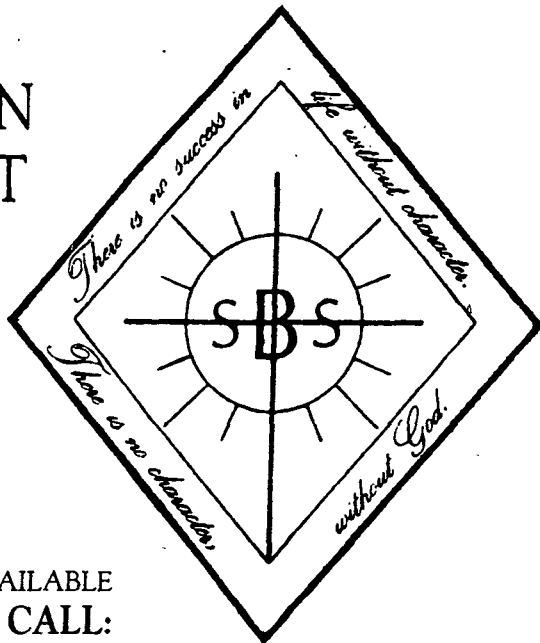
But, she noted proudly, "They have a lot of creativity, a lot of talent."

And, as Kyle Fitzpatrick might add, messy hands.

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