

# Getting their hands dirty for art

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With a cylinder of wet gray clay spinning in the middle of the Somers Middle School art classroom, Dan Lisowski was the first student volunteer in his class to help shape Cliff Mendelson's pottery-in-progress.

After dipping his hands into a bucket of clay slip - a mix of clay and water - Dan smiled when he squeezed the clay between his middle fingers near the base of the wheel and pushed it upward.

"It feels cool!" the 13-year-old said while Mendelson, a professional potter and visiting artist, controlled the speed of the wheel with a pedal similar to a car accelerator.

After walking away from the machine saying, "That was awesome," nine more eighth-graders raised their hands high in the air to be the next to shape the clay.

Meghan Gioffe's art class was one of four that day, and one of eight Somers Middle School classes overall, to participate in Mendelson's "A Day of Clay" presentation last week. The Somers Education Foundation paid most of the \$6,900 bill to secure Mendelson for the sixth-, seventh- and eighth-graders, according to Gioffe.

As he has done for 20 years, Mendelson taught students not only about making ceramics, but also about art history and culture. In his 83-minute session with the second eighth-grade class on Jan. 10, he instructed students about proper ceramic techniques; the relationship between form and function; and the differences among European, American Indian, Latin American and Far Eastern pottery.

To do this, he not only started making ceramics on his potter's wheel, but also showcased posters and other visual aids from different cultures "to demonstrate how the pieces are made and what the connection is between the cultures and the patterns and symbols," he said.

The second student in the class to work with the clay, 13-year-old Matt Dalton, said his favorite pots that Mendelson brought with him were a Greek one, with a wide shoulder and thin neck, and a Thai one, whose handle was in the shape of an elephant trunk.

Julia Cavaliere said she liked the double-spouted, ceremonial American-Indian pot Mendelson brought.

"I like the handle," she said. "And the triangle designs are cool."

Mendelson, a Rockland County resident, said he was impressed by the Somers students' enthusiasm, curiosity and art appreciation.

"I found the students to be really focused," said Mendelson, who will return four to six more times this school year. "They see that it's not about midterm exams. This is really about getting them connected to themselves."

Gioffe, in her second year in the Somers schools, said Mendelson made a great impression.

"We don't get to work on the wheel in the classroom, so this is something completely new, so it's always nice to see the awe in the kids' faces when they see Cliff work," she said.

Mendelson, 49, graduated from New Rochelle High School and the Boston Museum of Fine Arts. The former Parsons School of Design professor now teaches at Westchester Community College.

"But mostly, my main focus is working with the kids now," he said. "I've really cut down on all my other teaching engagements to do this, and I'm finding it so fulfilling - the response. You know, it's just sort of like, you feel at the end of the day that they're getting something."

