Creativity in Full Bloom at Blue Church Art

By Judd Wilson

UPPER SAUCON -- After 22 years of designing Easter bunnies and novelty candies as a freelance illustrator, Helene Parnell decided to start teaching local children the joy of art. She began with five daytime homeschool students in 2003 -- a nice little group, she said. But when parents kept asking her to take on after-school students, she had to decide whether or not to make the leap to late afternoon classes. In the end, she decided to -- and her students have multiplied like rabbits.

Ethelmae Traub learned to paint in Helene Parnell's adult art class, where she created the pieces displayed at Blue Church Art's art show on March 26. *Photo by Judd Wilson.*

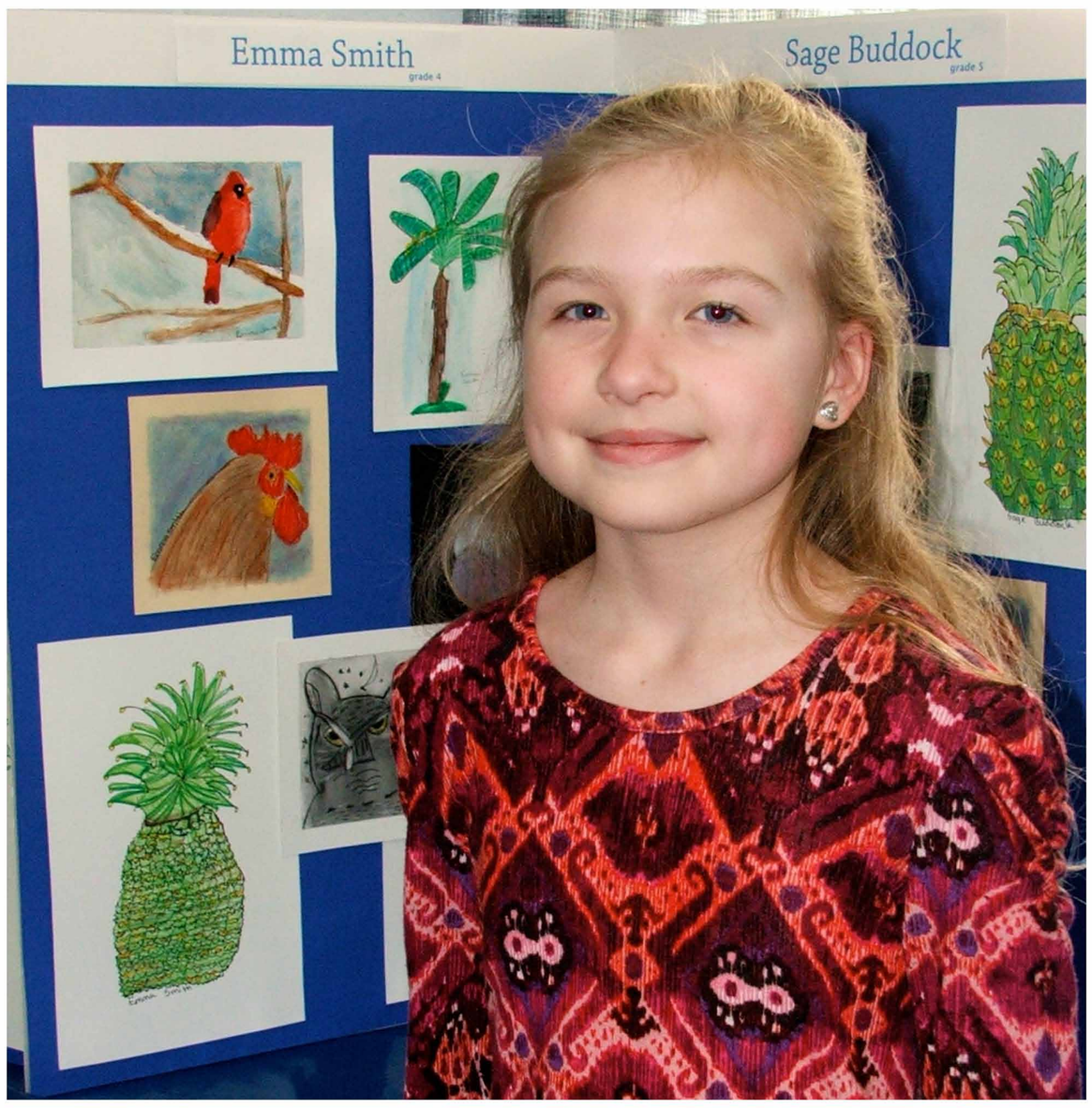
Today, seventy students ranging from 3 to 86 years old study under Parnell's tutelage. Ethelmae Traub, 86, began painting a few years after her husband's passing when daughter Janet gave Ethelmae some paints and brushes. Now the family matriarch has learned a new hobby, and meets with fellow artists throughout the year at Blue Church. At the other end of the spectrum, fourth-grader Emma Smith began taking painting this winter when her parents saw an ad for Parnell's class. Parents Brian and Maryann Smith support Emma's artistic growth. Emma said her favorite painting was one she made of a cardinal.

Janine Marlatt spoke about Parnell's class in glowing terms. Blue Church Art classes are perfect for working parents, she said, due to the wide range of daytime, afternoon, and evening classes. Many of her coworkers at Olympus in Center Valley have also gotten their kids into the program, she said. Since beginning the class, Marlatt's daughter Sarah had not only created paintings she could be proud of, but learned about self-expression and life. "It's very rewarding," Marlatt commented, to see her daughter and her classmates learn to help each other and feel better about life.

In fact, Parnell said, "creating art is good for your soul." She should know. Having painted for decades, Parnell said "the most wonderful events that have happened in my life happened because of art." As over 250 parents and friends at Blue Church Art's annual art show attested on March 26, Parnell loves her students. She is extremely patient with the little ones, one parent said, kindly helping them gain confidence and skill while having a great time each week.

Painting with other people is a lot of fun, said Parnell. She said that she teaches little kids to build their paintings using shapes they know, and lets them pick out what colors they'd like to use. She aims to teach all her students how to see an object. If a person sees the shapes and shadows on an object, he shouldn't be intimidated, said Parnell. "It's about seeing what's really there -- or whether you're drawing what you think is there," she said.

Blue Church Art offers a 10-week session in the fall, a 10-week session in the winter, and a 5-week session in the spring. The 5-week session begins April 12. Registration is required before the first day of class. Tuition is $55 for pre-K through grade 12, and $82.50 for adults. Tuesdays feature classes for adults from 10:30-noon, grades K-1 from 4:30-5:30 p.m., and grades 2-3 from 6-7 p.m. Wednesday classes include morning kindergarten & pre-K from 10-11 a.m., afternoon kindergarten & pre-K from 1:30-2:30 p.m., grades 6-12 from 3:15-4:15 p.m., grades 2-3 from 4:30-5:30 p.m., and grades 4-6 from 6-7 p.m. On Thursdays Parnell will offer afternoon kindergarten & pre-K from 1:30-2:30 p.m., grades 6-12 from 3:15-4:15 p.m., grades 4-6 from 4:30-5:30 p.m., and grades K-2 from 6-7 p.m. An art supply fee of $12 for grades pre-K through 3, and $25 for grade 4 and older, will apply to new students. Returning students who still have their art supply kits from previous sessions will pay $2. To register, please contact Parnell at 610-967-4504 or bluechurchart@juno.com.



Fourth-grader Emma Smith, above, shows off her favorite painting of a cardinal at Blue Church Art's art show on March 26. Helene Parnell's art students displayed their works at the show, some of which are shown to the left. *Photos by Judd Wilson.*