

Palenke Arts Festival to showcase Seaside student talent



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Juan Sanchez, Palenke Arts program coordinator at King Elementary School in Seaside on Thursday. Palenke Arts program will have its second annual Arts Festival in Seaside on Sunday. (Vern Fisher - Monterey Herald)

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Seaside >> A fledgling program that brings visual and performing arts together for students and the community will host its second annual festival in Seaside on Sunday.

The Palenke Arts Festival will be held at Laguna Grande Park from 1 to 5 p.m. and will feature performances by the students in the community arts program.

The festival is a free multicultural celebration of the arts and will feature, musical performances by Latin Jazz Collective with John Nava, AZA, a Tamazight (Berber) band from Morocco, as well as the Monterey Jazz Festival All-Star High School Band directed by Paul Contos, and all of the Palenke Arts student ensembles — children's chorus, hip hop dancers, mariachi lab and latin JazzJam.

“Our goal is to showcase Palenke Arts,” said Juan Sanchez, program coordinator. “The multicultural event will be a gift to the community.” Palenke Arts, a play on the Spanish word “palenque” which refers to a stage and seating venue for entertainment, is a multicultural arts center offering low-cost and free music, dance and art classes and concerts at King Elementary School in Seaside.

“It's neat to see it transform into a magnet for the arts,” said Robert Greenlee, the school's principal. “(Palenke Arts) is moving visual and performing arts to this site.”

The program's core team is composed of artists, musicians, educators and advocates. It represents the collaborative heart of the program whose mission is to educate and inspire the community through the arts by offering workshops in a safe space.

Palenke Arts' vision is to create an inclusive multicultural arts center in Seaside which provides a collection of a classroom, office and rehearsal spaces, along with indoor and outdoor gathering spots, a recording studio, computer lab, painting/drawing studio, and art gallery, some of which has yet to be realized.

According to Greenlee, the Palenke program helped King Elementary School secure a Turnaround Arts Program designation for the next three years.

Turnaround Arts began in 2011 as part of then-President Obama's advisory committee on cultural issues. Now led by the John F. Kennedy Center for the Performing Arts in partnership with the U.S. Department of Education, the National Endowment for the Arts, local partners and several private foundations, the program brings arts education programs and supplies to a group of the lowest-performing elementary and middle schools in the country. These resources help schools improve attendance, parent engagement, student motivation, and academic achievement.

But direct funding is not part of what the Turnaround Arts program provides for King.

Greenlee said the program helps schools connect with, and apply for, programs and grants that provide some funding or access to supplies from foundations and companies.

Sanchez said the Palenke Program at King started last fall and is slowly taking shape but is falling short of its funding goal of \$71,000.

“Hopefully the festival will be successful in introducing the program to more people,” said Sanchez.

The festival will have a raffle, T-shirt sales and a donation station to help generate proceeds. The Palenke website also has an avenue for the public to donate.

Part of the Turnaround application for designation requires a community arts organization component – enter Palenke, which had been looking for a home at the time.

“It was serendipitous,” said Sanchez. “We worked with PK (Diffenbaugh, Monterey Peninsula Unified School District superintendent) who did the vision and mission for Palenke Arts.”

MPUSD applied to become a Turnaround Arts site and won recognition which affords the community arts organization access to arts education resources and expertise, coaching, program methodologies, baseline evaluations, training, and peer-to-peer learning structures.

It also provides for high-profile Turnaround Artists who work with students and teachers, such as, Jackson Browne, who is assigned to, and recently visited King, providing students with a motivational speech, guidance in their artistic interests, an annual check on their progress and special arts integration projects.

Sanchez hopes the community will see the value in helping kids succeed in their pursuits while building better communities through the arts.

To learn more about the Palenke Arts Program, visit www.palenkearts.org.

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