

Imagine: a roomful of barnacles and jellyfish

By [Michele Miller](#), Times Staff Writer

Published Tuesday, October 7, 2008 11:51 AM

LUTZ

This is how to build a coral reef — the "artsy" kind. Like a real coral reef, it's a gradual, collaborative project, growing week by week in the art classroom at Denham Oaks Elementary. That's where students in the intermediate Deaf and Hard of Hearing class gather for about 45 minutes on Monday mornings to create their own aquatic sculpture under the instruction of guest artist Angela Dickerson and art teacher Cindy Smith. This is a magical kind of place where bottle caps become barnacles and strands of curly ribbon glued on to plastic condiment containers make for the perfect bobbing jellyfish. A 16-ounce plastic water bottle turns into a sinister shark. A shiny CD becomes a docile fish. It's all part of the VSA Arts of Florida's Hand in Hand program for students with special needs at Denham Oaks, Lake Myrtle, Cotee River and Northwest elementary schools. VSA Arts of Florida is part of an international nonprofit organization founded in 1974 by Jean Kennedy Smith to create a society where all people with disabilities learn through, participate in, and enjoy the arts. The acronym stands for "Vision of an inclusive community, Strength through shared resources, and Artistic expression that unites us all." **The Hand in Hand program is funded by a grant from the Community Foundation of Pasco County, a division of the Community Foundation of Tampa Bay.** For seven weeks, four artists meet with

special needs students at the four schools to create art work that will be featured in an exhibit later this month.

On the eighth week, an artist with a disability will come and create a collaborative piece of art with the students.

To cap off the program, a special exhibit featuring student art work will be held Nov. 20 at the Land O'Lakes Library.

No doubt there were some busy hands at Denham Oaks as students chatted while working on their reef last week.

The idea to make a coral reef sculpture out of recycled materials fits perfectly with a school-wide theme on Florida and the environment, said Smith, the art teacher.

"It's awesome," she said. "There's a synergy when you have artists and children. The energy is extra high when (students) know they are doing something special."

During week four, the Denham Oaks students used bath sponges to dab a bluish-green paint onto the long cardboard tubes — pilings — that were once used to hold reams of paper.

"I think it's great," said their classroom teacher, Ginny Ouellette. "It's awesome to see them working together, being creative."

A.J. Locklear, 10, said he enjoyed working with the ribbon and making a shark out of a bottle.

"I like it all," said fourth-grader Donavon Trujillo through an interpreter. "The fish, the jellyfish, painting the tubes."

And there's the added perk of getting to hang out in the special art class with his friend, James Nemokovich.

"We are able to talk a lot," Donavon said. "During the day we don't have time to talk."

As for the artist — well, she's having a great time, too.

"I really like the challenge of coming up with something new every week, and the kids seem to really like coming in here," Dickerson said. "And I got a hug today. That almost made me cry."

>>Fast facts

To learn more

- The Hand in Hand Art Exhibit and Reception will be from 4:30 to 6 p.m. Nov. 20 at the Land O'Lakes Library, 2818 Collier Parkway.
- For information about VSA Arts of Florida and the various programs offered, go to www.vsafil.org.

© 2008 • All Rights Reserved • St. Petersburg Times

490 First Avenue South • St. Petersburg, FL 33701 • 727-893-8111

[Contact Us](#) | [Join Us](#) | [Advertise with Us](#) | [Subscribe to the Times](#)

[Privacy Policy](#) | [Standard of Accuracy](#) | [Terms, Conditions & Copyright](#)