

# The Art of Teaching: Learning Life's Lessons through Art

By Kellie Burton, Publicity Associate

The Hungerford School, a public school on Staten Island, serves a special needs population of approximately 250 students ages 12-21, many of whom are classified as medically fragile to severely and profoundly mentally challenged. This year, thanks to an ongoing partnership with New York's **Museum of Modern Art (MoMA)**, and the dedication of educator **Gordon Sasaki**, Hungerford students learned important life lessons through participation in a series of art-viewing and art-making exercises.

Not many artists can say they have shown artwork at MoMA, but with the help of a Parents As Arts Partners (PAAP) grant from The Center for Arts Education, and the involvement of the parents, Hungerford students unveiled their final product, a 5' x 15' community mural, at **MoMA's Cullman Education and Research Building** on November 9, 2007:

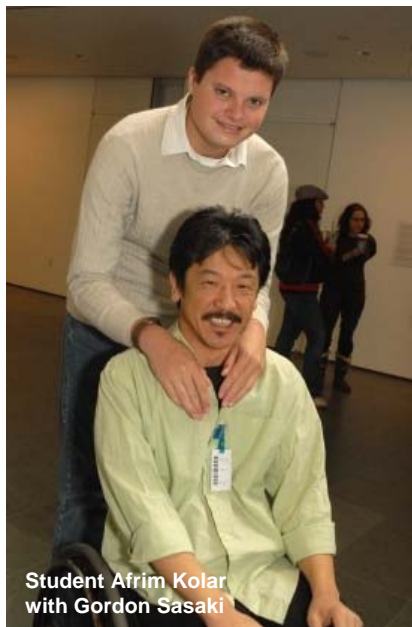
This month, read about Sasaki's experience with the Hungerford students and his thoughts on the importance of integrating arts education into the lives of children of all abilities.

## Gordon Sasaki on Arts Education

Sasaki, a long-time educator at MoMA and faculty member at VSA Arts Institute, has spent nearly 20 years teaching the arts to students of all abilities, including those with special needs. A wheelchair user himself, Sasaki understands the important role the arts play in the development of observational, analytic and language skills, as well as self-esteem and confidence building.

"The arts are absolutely essential and fundamental to children with different learning abilities," explained Sasaki. "Disability can interfere with the lives of individuals in radically different ways, impacting their ability to communicate with others, to retain information, and to naturally express themselves. These abilities are inherently supported and developed through the creative process."

In both his own artwork and in his teaching approach, Sasaki incorporates



multi-sensory and inclusive strategies to describe concepts of diversity, using art as a vehicle for transcendence and inspiration. "I teach from the position of personal experience, understanding how the arts are an integral component of not only what I do, but also who I am. Art has been and continues to be a vital tool for me to express and engage concerns I have regarding the awareness and understanding of disability and the commonalities we all share."

## Working with the Hungerford Students

This particular PAAP project took bold steps to create unquestioned access to inclusive arts learning that can help strengthen artistic, academic, and social skills for these students as well as their families. Many of the students at Hungerford are autistic and many are physically unable to verbalize their feelings. While working with the students in the PAAP workshops, Sasaki found that they were able to focus and maintain their attention for longer periods of time, proving that the arts can be a vital mode of communication for them. "Through art, the students were free to experiment and express themselves without consequence or shame - and this is so important,

especially for students with disabilities."

## Sasaki as a Role Model

According to Sasaki, a huge social barrier in overall disability awareness is the lack of visibility of people with disabilities in roles of authority and leadership. "If my using a wheelchair in any way helps to break down these barriers and assists me in communicating with my students, then I will gladly accept the role."

In the eyes of one Hungerford parent, Sasaki has been hugely influential in the lives of these children. "He is a wonderful role model for our students," said parent coordinator Janet Manolakos, who participated in the project with her daughter, Theresa, a Hungerford alumna. "Some of our students are in wheelchairs, some are verbal, some are not. It's important for them to see and hear from someone who is successful in their chosen career path," she said.

## Parents are the Link

Sasaki explained that although he sees himself as having a certain influence, parents are the most critical link in breaking down this lack of ability to communicate with the students. "These parents are familiar with their child's mannerisms and they understand the subtle modes of communication that include body language and other physical behavior that would otherwise be virtually impossible for a new teacher to decipher or understand until they were thoroughly familiar with the student."

## Arts Make the Difference

"The impact the arts can have couldn't be more visible than during these workshops and the time I spent with these families," said Sasaki. "Understanding that core learning is only enhanced through the creative process and that the arts are essential toward raising a fully integrated, globally viable adult, is a huge step forward in securing arts learning for all children."