



The Long Islander's
Northport

JOURNAL

ESTABLISHED IN 1874

WWW.LONGISLANDERNEWS.COM

*A Journal of History,**the Arts & Entertainment*

Channeling Aggression Through Art

*Huntington artist
reaps the rewards of art
therapy in the classroom*

BY JOANNE KOUNTOURAKIS

When Erich J. Preis began his stint as an art teacher at the School for Social Change in the South Bronx, he came face-first with a barrage of obstacles. In a high school with a notorious history of violence, Preis was greeted with threats, weapons and, on his very first day, an iceball thrown at his classroom window.

"They put me in the worst school and they basically expected me to fail," said the 28-year-old Halesite resident. In the face of adversity, Preis sought — and eventually found — refuge in his background of art therapy. "I knew it I was going to make it, I was going to have to use everything I learned in art therapy," he said.

An artist himself, he had seen how art quenched some emotional needs in his life and thought that he too could get through to his students if he added a twist to his high school's agenda.

He didn't have to search hard for a vision. Inspired by Auguste Rodin's *Burgbers of Calais*, Preis sketched a group of figures representing religious figures, both male and female, from around the world. From a Jewish leader to a Protestant, Muslim, Catholic and Buddhist, each figure is in a different pose to represent individuality. Yet the group stands near one another in mutual agreement, showing that peace can exist despite differences in nationality, race and religion.

In his vision, the students would form clay figures to make a three-dimensional model of the sketch.

When Preis first joined the School for Social Change, he was assigned approximately 30 students. Many of them were the most difficult students in the building, including a well-known and popular 17-year-old with a history of hostility and gang affiliation.

Preis said that once he won the particular youngster over, his classmates followed suit. "It was definitely the turning point," he said. "It



Originally envisioned by Halesite resident and artist/educator Erich J. Preis (inset), the Multi-Cultural Sculpture project, above, was turned into reality after students from the School for Social Change in the South Bronx, a school with a reputation for violence, formed clay figures to make a three-dimensional model of Preis' sketch.

gave them hope."

No one could have anticipated the progress Preis would make in four short months. In what would seem to be a fateful succession of events, the class sculpture project has been funded and completed, and is temporarily decorating the superintendent's office in a district that was at first hesitant to accept Preis and his practice.

And, to Preis' delight, he has demonstrated the power of art to change kids. The project, he said, became the reason the kids came to school. It taught them the value of education and the benefits of working together, he said.

To understand his belief in art therapy, Preis revisits his own accomplishments since a learning disability threatened to shortchange him of an education.

Diagnosed with dyslexia when he was a young child, Preis wasn't expected to graduate from high school. A member of Harborfields' class of 1992, Preis went on to get his associate's degree in fine arts from the Fashion Institute of Technology in Manhattan. On a partial-scholarship, he was then immersed in an intensive figurative program at the Pennsylvania Academy of Fine Arts, going on

to study art therapy at C.W. Post. It was through the philosophy of art therapy that Preis himself was able to confront the emotions of his childhood adoption, and of his learning disabilities. "I guess the psychology got me in touch with my own art," he said. "I'm extremely happy that I went for a bachelor's in art therapy," said Preis, who attributes his success at Post to the help he received from the college's academic resource center. "It gave me the tutoring skills I needed and the courage to believe in myself."

Preis had been studying art since he was nine years old, when he began taking classes at the Huntington School of Fine Arts under the guidance of director Joe Mack. By the time he was 12, Preis began drawing the figure. He hasn't stopped since.

Recently, Preis visited Mack to show the veteran teacher his most recent work, a series of oversized 20th century paintings concentrating on the intertwined themes of technology and isolationism. On that visit, Mack offered Preis a job teaching drawing and painting at the Huntington school. Preis didn't hesitate to say yes.

It's a matter of good timing for Preis, who

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