

## YOUNG READERS EXPLORE THE ART OF NATURE

Carol Felixson, who directs Education and Community Outreach for the NRS's Stunt Ranch Santa Monica Mountains Reserve and UCLA's Mildred E. Mathias Botanical Garden, is always seeking ways to promote the extensive K-12 education programs at both sites. So she decided to write a children's art and science column for her local paper.

Nothing too unusual about that strategy — until you consider that Felixson's "local paper" is the *Los Angeles Times*, which reaches three million people every day of the week.

Felixson's column, "Drawing from Nature," runs the first Sunday of each month as lead article on the "Kids' Reading Room" page. In each issue, Felixson tells a natural history story related to an animal or a plant found at the Stunt Ranch Reserve or in the Mathias Botanical Garden, while also providing instructions for an art project. The articles are illustrated with art created by children and accompanied by photos of the young artists.

The range of natural history subjects and art projects is broad: a great horned owl collaged in feathers, sugar

cookies shaped like desert cottontails, origami hummingbirds, pointillist raccoons, and face masks designed to transform the wearer into a coyote. Each project is accompanied by instructions geared to young readers, so they can try it themselves.

When Felixson began studying "Kids' Reading Room" to see what sort of articles they printed, the first thing she noticed was a weekday feature called "The California Classroom, A Learning Link to..." The pieces were usually written by staff from local museums, science centers, and botanical gardens,

### How art and nature are brought together

Though Carol Felixson's "Drawing from Nature" articles appear simple and straightforward, each involves a tremendous amount of work.

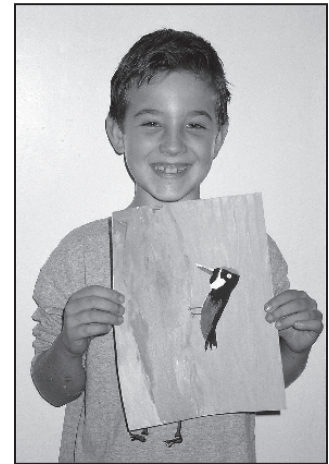
Once she selects a topic and an art technique, Felixson builds a research folder for both herself and the artist. Her research includes interesting facts and images about the subject, as well as concepts she thinks will capture the attention of young readers. "I usually accumulate about ten pages of research on a subject," she explains, "but I only have 150 words for the natural history story, so I have to pull the readers in quickly. Sometimes it's something really weird, like the stinkbug putting its head down, sticking its butt in the air, and putting out a foul odor. Kids really liked that."

With the story underway, Felixson sends her research to the artist, usually via the parents, in an email, along with suggestions of different Web sites where they can see additional images and learn more about the subject. She provides directions that take them step-by-step through the art technique, explaining what materials they'll need, what they have to do, and what she's looking for. She is also careful to let the parents know that, while they should supervise their children's efforts in a project, this isn't something for *them* to take over and do themselves.

Felixson is constantly searching for new artists. "Initially, I simply went to people I knew who had children," she recalls. "Now, people often contact me, and I've also gotten to know a number of art teachers who work with kids who are really fine artists." Her efforts go beyond trying to find kids who can do art. She also strives to balance the artists' genders, ethnicities, and neighborhoods. She has especially enjoyed the times when two siblings work cooperatively on a project.

For Felixson, the most gratifying moment comes when she finally meets the child and sees the project for the first time. "It's amazing," she says. "No matter what I might imagine when I come up with the idea, the children always, without exception, surpass my wildest imagination. Sometimes they add things I hadn't thought of, or they do the work with a creative flair in their choice of colors or how they use the materials. They've been particularly good at giving the animals personalities."

At that first face-to-face meeting, Felixson takes photographs of the artist with his or her finished project and at work on a similar project. She also borrows the art in order to create a digital scan that meets the paper's production requirements. — *JB*



CAROL FELIXSON REGARDS AS CO-CREATORS THE CHILDREN WHO PRODUCE

THE ART THAT ACCOMPANIES HER REGULAR COLUMN, "DRAWING FROM NATURE": "THE COLUMN WOULDN'T BE WHAT IT IS WITHOUT THEM." SHE ALSO HOPES HER WORK ENCOURAGES TEACHERS TO LOOK AT SCIENCE IN NEW WAYS: "FOR SCIENCE TEACHERS, GETTING AT A SCIENCE SUBJECT THROUGH AN ART PROJECT IS A WAY TO REACH KIDS WHO ARE JUST NOT INTERESTED IN THE ACADEMIC APPROACH, BUT WHO LOVE THE ART. SO, AS THEY DO THE ART PROJECT, THEY'RE LEARNING ABOUT THE ANIMAL AND ITS NATURAL HISTORY." SOME OF FELIXSON'S YOUNG CONTRIBUTORS AND THEIR ART ARE SHOWN ABOVE (LEFT TO RIGHT): JULIA SCHWARTZ, AGE 12, WITH HER PASTEL RENDERING OF POISON OAK; DANIELLE SORK, AGE 8, AND HER COYOTE MASK; ROMIE DRORI, AGE 5, AND HER COLLAGE DEPICTING AN ALLIGATOR LIZARD ON FOREST LITTER; JACKSON CRITES, AGE 6, AND HIS PAINTING OF AN ACORN WOODPECKER. PHOTOS BY CAROL FELIXSON

and focused on a current exhibit or topic of special interest. Each usually included a photograph from the institution or a professional illustration.

Felixson decided she, too, would write a "learning link." Rather than submit the usual institutional photo or professional illustration, however, she would have a child illustrate her story. The first article she submitted focused on the banana plants in the Mathias Botanical Garden and was illustrated by a friend's daughter, Davita Paul, who was then 10 years old.

"I called the piece 'Hands with Yellow Fingers,'" Felixson says. "And Davita's art added so much. I'd asked her to do any kind of illustration of a banana tree, but she went way beyond what I had imagined — she put herself in there and a little monkey, too."

Mary Ellen Walker, editor of "Kids' Reading Room" at the *L.A. Times*, works with dozens of freelance children's

authors and educators for her column, and she was impressed by the unusual submission. She ran that first article in April 2001 and encouraged Felixson to write more. In the months that followed, Felixson became an intermittent columnist for the section, writing pieces as she found time and asking friends if their children would like to provide illustrations. "I didn't give the kids any direction about what art technique they should use," Felixson recalls. "I just said, 'Here's a subject — go for it.'"

Walker saw major potential in Felixson's early submissions. She said, "This [approach] was so unique and the illustrations were so endearing, I invited her to come down to the *Times* for lunch, and I asked her if she'd ever thought about writing stories that *teach* kids how to do scientific drawing."

Though the idea was new to Felixson, she'd always liked having children go out into nature to draw what they observed. Talking together, Walker and

Felixson came up with the concept of a monthly column that would include both a nature lesson and an art lesson — all conveyed in less than 300 words! Thus was born "Drawing from Nature."

Beginning in July 2003, the column became a regular in the Sunday "Kids' Reading Room." Walker chose the Sunday edition so that the feature could run in color and present the children's beautiful illustrations to best advantage. "We usually feature fiction on Sunday," she adds, "so Carol's nature lesson is a great once-a-month change." — *JB*

*For more information, contact:*

Carol Felixson  
 Director of Education and  
 Community Outreach  
 UCLA Botanical Gardens/  
 Stunt Ranch Reserve  
 Box 951786, 23-126 WH  
 Los Angeles, CA 90095-1786  
 Phone: 310-206-3887  
 Email: cfelixso@ucla.edu