

# A Family Album

# Teacher's Guide

## Description of Program

Susanmarie Cunningham's soft sculpture presentation, *A Family Album*, combines elements of costuming, storytelling, puppetry, and clowning to tell a hilariously playful, yet poignant tale about growing up. The life sized soft sculptures worn by Susanmarie and student volunteers comically address issues that are common and heartfelt to elementary and middle school students. The life skills woven into the presentation include - learning to be a good friend, tempering romance with wisdom, the importance of self reliance, and using your own uniqueness to build self esteem. A feast for the eyes, the mind, and the soul!

## Objectives of Program

- To have students increase their understanding of human relationships.
- To develop confidence and pride in their own individual talents.
- To see how everyday topics can be approached in a creative way.
- To learn about soft sculpture as an art form.

## Content of Program

The stage is set with draped figures on stands. Susanmarie as a mother and baby greets the students. The baby is thrilled to be at school and shows off her new school clothes - dress, hat, and good panties. The baby defines soft sculpture and puts the baby portion on a student. Students wear the next two sculptures. One is a best friend who knows when to open her mouth and when to keep it closed; the other one is a father who is very strict about TV, but spends time reading to his kids. Susanmarie shows a very silly boyfriend and discusses the qualities that are important and those that are not in choosing friends.

A wedding dress, titled *I think I can, I think I can, I think I can*, reflects on her decision to learn to take care of herself and to learn to like herself before she got married.

Before showing the last piece, Susanmarie relates how she grew up feeling like a dummy because she wasn't very smart in school. By working hard at the talents she did have; sewing, caring about people, and being silly, she developed her career and she learned to be very happy and proud of herself.

Students are encouraged to identify and list their own talents and areas of interest. If they have a hard time identifying their talents, they should ask their friends, teachers and parents.

Susanmarie, dressed as an old woman with a poodle, ends the program by telling students to not spend a lot of time feeling bad about all the things that they aren't good at doing, but rather work hard at the talents they do have so that they will grow up to be happy and proud of themselves.

## Preprogram Activities

**Vocabulary:** These words are included and defined in the program.

- Sculpture - Three dimensional artwork such as statues.
- Soft Sculpture - Sculpture made out of soft materials.
- Puns - The humorous use of words which sound alike but have different meanings, i.e., "A duck goes into a drugstore and asks the pharmacist, 'Give me some Chapstick and put it on my bill.'"

## For Discussion

*Artists create art to express an idea.*

## Literature

- Students should be familiar with the book, *The Little Engine That Could*, by Watty Piper.



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# Program Follow-Up Activities

## For Discussion

- ⇒ Did you notice these lessons about life that were incorporated into the program?
  - It is important to find friends who know when to open and when to close their mouths. Give an example of when your friends should open or close their mouths.
  - Strict parents can seem really mean, but they can teach you valuable lessons and habits.
  - Choosing a boyfriend or girlfriend based on just their looks probably won't give you the kind of friend you really want. What do you consider important qualities in your friends?
  - It is more interesting when people wear the clothes that reflect their own personalities instead of dressing *in fashion* and ending up looking like everyone else.
  - It is probably a good idea to wait until you have accomplished some very important things such as learning to take care of your self and learning to like yourself before you get married.
  - Don't spend a lot of time feeling bad about all the things you are not good at doing. Notice the talents and interests you do have, work hard at them, to be proud of yourself.
- ⇒ Teachers can tell students what their talents and inspirations were as children, and why they decided to become teachers.
- ⇒ Discuss these quotes by Ralph Waldo Emerson:
  - Originality is being one's self and reporting accurately what we see and are.
  - Our chief want in life is somebody who shall make us do what we can. This is the service of a friend.

## Writing

- Students can write a list of their talents and inspirations. Parents and teachers could add to the student's lists for even more positive input.
- Students can write or draw puns.

## References

- *A Chocolate Moose for Dinner*, Fred Gwynne, 1988. (Grades 1-6)
- *The Encyclopedia of Homonyms - Sound Alikes*, Condensed and Abridged, Dora Newhouse, 1978. (Grades 6-12)
- *Homonyms: Hair and Hare and other words that sound the same but look as different as Bear and Bare*, Joan Hanson. (Grades K-3)
- *The King Who Rained*, Fred Gwynne, 1988. (Grades 1-6)
- *Put Your Foot in Your Mouth & Other Silly Sayings*, James A. Cox, 1980. (Grades 2-5)

## Reading

Students can study the younger lives and inspirations of famous, creative, successful, and happy people. For older students: *American Childhoods an Anthology*, David Willis McCullough, Editor. Little, Brown, 1987.

Students can study the origin of soft sculpture, with the work of Claes Oldenburg (b. 1929) and the Pop Art Movement which made us look at ordinary humble objects in new and unusual ways.

## Other Activities

Students from the youngest to the oldest could have an old fashioned *Show and Tell*. This would help them gain confidence in oral presentation as the subject would be very familiar, and it would give other students and teachers a chance to gain new insights into each student.



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