

# Muppets Take High School

## EJK Grant Funds Diversity Project

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**H**igh schoolers playing with puppets? Well, at the High School for Law Enforcement and Public Safety, it was *making* the puppets that had students not only engaged but also learning about diverse cultures.

An Ezra Jack Keats (EJK) Mini Grant funded a powerful Diversity and Tolerance unit taught by art teacher Stefanie Abbey and myself at the inner-city public school in Jamaica, NY.

The High School for Law Enforcement and Public Safety is a small school that caters to students interested in exploring such careers as the various branches of military, police, the Department of Corrections, the FBI, and the Office of Homeland Security. Students leave our school with an overall, well balanced education that exposes them to a variety of educational experiences.

In Spring 2018, our Diversity and Tolerance unit taught students about people and cultures other than their own. As a Title I school, our school is always struggling to bring engaging programs to the school that are low-cost or free. So, we were thrilled to learn about the EJK Mini-Grant. We applied in March 2017 and were awarded \$500 for our program.

We taught the unit to four high school Visual Arts classes, with approximately 140 students. The unit began with video clips of general Muppet-making, video biographies of Jim Henson, and clips of Jim Henson's Muppets such as those from *The Dark Crystal* and Kermit the Frog's "It Ain't Easy Being Green" video.

For research, we took groups of these students to the Jim Henson exhibit at the Museum of the Moving Image in Astoria, NY, in February 2017.

Afterwards, the students explored meanings of diversity and what diversity meant to each student individually and then

began designing their own Muppets. Students learned basic sewing stitches, and after successfully sewing a pincushion for practice, students traced pieces from a pattern onto fleece, cut out the pieces, and then hand sewed the pieces into the Muppet.

Once the basic Muppet was sewn together, each student personalized their own individual Muppet based on their design sketches and presented their own Muppet to the class.

Finally, students worked in groups to write and act out a skit about diversity, which were filmed and put together in one video. The skits ranged from a group song about diversity to a play about aliens.

The video compilation was shown and the Muppets were displayed at High School for Law Enforcement and Public Safety's Festival of the Arts in Spring 2018.

This was a valuable but costly unit, primarily due to the cost of the fleece used for the Muppet bodies. The grant covered the cost of the raw materials for these diverse puppets.

The Diversity and Tolerance unit was very emotional and heartwarming, and it gave students the opportunity to discuss social issues and to express themselves in a safe space.



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Students used the Muppets to discuss subjects including LGBTQ, ADHD, incarceration, drug use, bullying, hair color, and more.

One especially poignant presentation was when an immigrant student broke down in tears in front of her classmates as she explained how her Muppet speaks with an accent and, therefore, is not always understood.

The students learned from one another about tolerance of diversity as well. An eleventh grader, an immigrant from Guyana, said, "I will treat people that are diverse with respect and care. They are more special, and I want them to see that."

The impact of this unit was noticed throughout the school building. The unit sometimes had unexpected positive

changes on our students. One teacher said that sewing calmed one of her students so much that she instructed him to always bring sewing to her class.

Furthermore, during times of day that students tended to find trouble, students were instead sitting on the hallway floors, stitching their Muppets.

Sewing skills and cultural awareness were just part of the learning achieved thanks to the help of the EJK Foundation grant. &

*Lesson plans for this unit can be purchased on Teachers-Pay-Teachers.*

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