

Holiday history

KINDERGARTENERS EXPLORE NATIVE AMERICAN TRADITIONS



Graham DeBelder was proud of the height of his inukshuk. TRISHA BOWDEN

Amanda Karioth Council on Culture & Arts

There's a famous book by Robert Fulghum titled "All I Really Need to Know I Learned in Kindergarten." This phrase has entered the common vernacular due to the popularity of the book and the title's humor and inherent truth. We do learn a lot in kindergarten, like how to write the letters of the alphabet and how to use numbers to count and sort.

We also learn life and social skills like sharing and saying please and thank you. Lifelong friendships bloom in kindergarten and children begin to understand the connections between themselves and others and how important those relationships can be.



Cornerstone kindergarteners are eager to share what they've learned about Native Americans. AMANDA THOMPSON

Holiday rituals are also explored in the kindergarten classroom and educators often try to provide context for those traditions. Trisha Bowden, the kindergarten lead teacher at Cornerstone Learning Community, is one of them.

She is committed to presenting the story of Thanksgiving in a simplified but realistic way, choosing culture over caricature. "Growing up in the '80s, we did a lot of turkey handprints and Pilgrim hats. Thinking back, it makes me cringe," confessed Bowden. "The more education that I got, in undergrad and grad school, I thought 'what were they teaching me when I was younger?'"

Bowden believes it's her responsibility to teach the true history of the holiday, which includes the perspective and role of indigenous Americans. Doing so requires her to set aside portions of her own educational experience and motivates her to fully embrace others.

Raised in the Pacific Northwest, Bowden became familiar with the culture and customs of the Haida American Indian tribe. She later moved

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Some of the materials the class used for building their inukshuk structures.

AMANDA THOMPSON

Traditions

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to New York where she learned about the Iroquois and their artwork. Her first teaching job was in Nevada and her students studied the Hopi tribe and their petroglyphs. These images carved into rock served as visual representations of a complex belief structure.

"We had field trips to the Valley of Fire State Park and we talked about the stories of the generations before the common era and what tools they had. I'd try to recreate that for the children. Getting something in their hand is a much better learning experience than just staring at a picture."

Bowden's philosophy of hands-on learning stems from her training in the Montessori method, a child-centered and discovery-based educational model that encourages children to engage with natural materials. This method aligns perfectly with Bowden's lesson on inukshuk (singular inukshuk).

These sculptural cairns were used as tools for navigation across the vast expanses of barren northern lands. They were created by members of many different North American Indian tribes including the Inuit.

Cornerstone kindergartner Mary Jane "MJ" Calder explained, "an inukshuk helps people find their way back to their home if it's cloudy. They could use them to find their way to hunt." Her classmate Graham DeBelder took a theatrical approach to describing the practice and, using a wooden stool as a stand-in, he acted out the advantages of having an inukshuk in the neighborhood.

"Oh, no, I can't find my way and I need to go fishing," he exclaimed with a dramatic delivery. Then feigning surprise upon reaching the stool, he cheered "Yay, I found the fishing pond." Graham added that the structures were "made usually out of rocks but they can be made with anything. They balanced them, on top, on top, on top."

After learning the history and significance of these landmarks, Bowden challenged her students to make their own small-scale inukshuk. "I like to

build things," shared MJ, and for this project, she said, "we used round and flat rocks."

"A lot of the children challenged themselves to see how high can we get it, or how wide can we get it, or how many rocks can we use without it toppling over," said Bowden. "At this age, they learn so much through their senses and anything didactic they can get their hands on so I really focus on pieces that they might be able to find in their natural play."

That includes models and other interactive representations of how American Indians in different parts of our country would have lived back in 1621. This is the year that is often cited as the first Thanksgiving, a celebratory feast complete with a burnished turkey on a table groaning under the weight of a bountiful spread. Only, most historians agree that's not what happened.

"Turkey wasn't even there. They were hungry," said Bowden of the new settlers. "The people of the Wampanoag tribe were the ones that taught them how to plant and how to hunt." What was probably on the table that fateful day was salted and dried fish and venison along with nuts and any berries that could be scrounged up. Cornerstone kindergartners learn about food preservation and they get to sample some of the historically accurate Thanksgiving offerings.

That's important to Bowden who acknowledges there are much larger questions and challenging concerns surrounding the holiday's history though she is careful to present content that is suitable for kindergartners.

"They are so much smarter than we give them credit for. Let's teach them the truth and in a culturally appropriate way," she said. "Let's be sensitive to how we say things. There's nothing wrong with looking at things in a different light or from a different angle. Every minute is a learning moment for these children, they're sponges and I want them to really dig deep."

Amanda Karioth Thompson is the Assistant Director for the Council on Culture & Arts. COCA is the capital area's umbrella agency for arts and culture (www.tallahasseearts.org).