Shown above are two examples of student work from the Digital Studio Lab at Derry Area High School's art program. Created in the 3D Animation class, "Conscriptor" (left) is a robot designed by Chris Palm and "Evets" is a ninja fighting eskimo character by Steve Kleinbub. Both students will be juniors next year and hope to continue in the program with the Digital Fantasy Painting class. Images are copyrighted by the students and are used with permission.

Derry Art Dept. receives digital studio grant

Art programs at high school have received numerous awards for use of innovative technology

Derry Area School District Superintendent Joseph Bellissimo announced the art department recently received a grant in the amount of $8,046 to expand the Digital Studio Lab at Derry Area High school.

Funding for the lab project was provided by the Educational Improvement Tax Credit (EITC) Program of The Community Foundation of Westmoreland County. The funds will be used to purchase new software to support the current courses offered by the department, including a popular 3D Animation class, as well as a new Digital Fantasy Painting course that is planned for the fall.

During a brief ceremony at the Greensburg Country Club to mark the award, Bellissimo acknowledged the competitive aspect of the award by congratulating the other districts, as well as thanking the committee for its vision for awarding Derry's art program. "The art department at Derry has seen great strides in its use of innovation and technology, particularly under the influence of one of our many outstanding instructors, Mr. McWherter, who teaches at the high school," Belissimo said. Richard McWherter, the art teacher who applied for the grant, accepted the award for the department and also thanked the committee for selecting the district's proposal.

"When people ask why the art department needs technology, the answer is more of a perception problem," said McWherter. "You can't buy a piece of gum in this country without it being scanned by several computers, and art is just as affected by that culture." His point was that to prepare students for what's out there after high school, they need advanced computer skills in all areas. "And traditionally, artists are usually at the forefront of many of society's innovations," he added.

McWherter also admitted to the committee that he really didn't think of himself as an art teacher, but more of a facilitator for creative thinking. "The short answer is I'm an art teacher, but the truth is I see my job description as maintaining an environment for creative thinking and problem-solving that is vital for every student today," McWherter said. "Regardless of whether they plan on making a career in art or science, or whatever the career might be, these are skills they will use everywhere."

According to Belissimo, the art department at the high school has received several grants and awards over the last few years, particularly in the area of innovation and technology, and many of those awards have been through the efforts of McWherter. Currently, the high school has received more than $60,000 in grants and awards from corporate, private and public foundations and is always open to increasing opportunities for the students. In 2005, McWherter received recognition on the state level as a Pennsylvania Keystone Innovator for his use of technology in the classroom.

McWherter also stated that these programs are student-driven. "Believe me, I don't look for more uses for computers. But these students are motivated by today's technologies and the possibilities that are there. They actually bring these ideas to me and say, 'Mr. McWherter, you should teach us this!' and if I can make that happen, I will," McWherter said. "It's a win/win situation when your students show up at your classroom door eager to learn."

Specifically, the grant will be used to upgrade and add advanced capabilities through the purchase of educational versions of professional imaging software packages being used in industry, such as Adobe Photoshop CS and Discreet's 3ds Max animation software. These are advanced programs that allow the students the opportunity to create professional quality illustrations that can be used in their portfolios when seeking post-secondary opportunities.

Over the years, a number of students have gone on to further education in the arts in general and computer graphics and animation specifically. To date, students have used the Digital Studio Lab to produce logos, brochures, digital portfolios, skill examples, classroom presentations and posters, including one student who made a highly detailed animation of blood cells and arteries for a science project.

The lab also has been used to produce logos, posters and brochures for use in the community by nonprofit organizations, including the district's alumni association, the district's education foundation, the Art Department's community access Web page and the Barbara Thompson Early Childhood Literacy Center.

Some of the projects included creating motivational and instructional posters for both teachers and coaches at the high school, as well as posters of both community leaders and distinguished alumni that hang in the halls of the high school.

Currently, the lab consists of 10 computer stations running the advanced animation software and offers two sections of the 3D Animation course, which usually has a waiting list of students who want to sign up for the class. Based on student interest, the department is adding the Digital Fantasy Painting class this fall and once again the enrollment requests have been very strong and the district hopes to add more computers if it's financially possible.

"The Digital Painting class is more of a blend between the old and the new technologies, so it's not as intimidating for some students. And it builds on the Renaissance tradition of using both art and science together," McWherter said. "And I have no doubt that if DaVinci were alive today he would not only own a computer, but would probably build his own," he added.

The lab also was recently upgraded with a digital projection capability so students can view their work in the increasingly popular high-definition standard in the imaging industry. And all of these courses have been designed to meet or exceed the Pennsylvania Academic Standards for the Arts and maintain rigorous curriculum challenges. But according to McWherter, that's the best part of the program. "It's actually great," McWherter said, "because when the students are motivated to learn, it's all downhill from there. So when I say, 'OK class, do you want to whitewash the virtual fence today? No? Well, take a look at this nifty new spray gun software tool that is so cool,' and then it's actually fun!"

For more information on the award-winning programs at Derry Area High School's Art Department, visit derryasd.schoolwires.com and click on "HS/MS Staff" button to find the link to McWherter's Web page online.

Since its inception, The Community Foundation of Westmoreland County has made in excess of $5.5 million in grants to local charitable organizations. It currently administers more than 180 component funds and $10.5 million in assets. The mission of The Community Foundation is to encourage local residents to become philanthropists, provide grants that support a wide variety of charitable organizations and serve as a community leader.