“I want to be more green.” That was Christina Martinez’s New Year’s Resolution, and she’s certainly putting her plan into action.

As art teacher at Holyoke Elementary School, Martinez has made it an everyday practice to use recycled and repurposed materials in both her classroom and in her personal art projects.

“It’s something I’m really interested in,” said Martinez, admitting she can spend hours at a time browsing YouTube for new project ideas. “I ask myself, ‘What can I do with things that are free or really cheap?’”

Holyoke Elementary School art teacher Christina Martinez, who is always looking for creative art projects using repurposed and recycled materials, explains this cork board she made was almost completely free. She loves exploring projects like this both in her classroom and in her personal artwork.—Enterprise photo

Sock monsters are Martinez’s latest project with her fifth-grade students. By utilizing old socks and other fabric scraps, the project contains almost all recycled materials. The kids even brought old pillows they could use for recycled stuffing for their sock monsters.

The kids learned simple blanket and running stitches as well as the difference between handmade and manufactured items. After sketching ideas for their sock monsters, the students

used problem-solving skills to determine the steps they needed to take to make their sock monsters come to life.

It’s always good to exercise the muscle in the brain that makes kids better problem solvers, said Martinez.

She has been surprised how engaged the students are in the project, even the boys, who normally would stay away from activities—like sewing—that are stereotyped as something only girls do. “It’s cool to see them so into it,” said Martinez.

The fifth-graders are also bridging a generation gap, asking their parents and grandparents for help with new stitches to make their own sock monsters at home.

Colby Purkeypile concentrates hard on sewing his sock monster during fifth-grade art class this week. Students utilized materials like mismatched socks, fabric scraps and even stuffing from old pillows to create sock monkeys and other animals out of recycled items.—Enterprise photo

Martinez said the kids love doing handmade projects they can keep or use. First, it gives them a sense of accomplishment, and second, it allows them to see how art affects their everyday lives. “It’s nice to see the kids make that connection between art and everyday life,” she added.

For instance, last year, Martinez had the kids tie dye pillow cases, a perfect way to introduce them to the importance of art in everyday life. It was something they could value and use on a daily basis. The cool thing about that project was that every pillowcase was recycled from a hotel where Martinez's mom worked.

Art classes have also made snakes out of old ties and Christmas ornaments out of recycled paper and other materials.

"It really makes my projects go a lot farther," said Martinez, noting how important it is to use recycled and repurposed materials. "It has eased the budget," she said, because now she can spend more money on the "bread and butter" type stuff, like paint and bigger pieces of equipment for the art room.

"People have been very supportive by giving me the things I need," said Martinez. She advised people to not hesitate in asking friends, family and coworkers to save items for their next art or craft project.

She's thinking about exploring the idea of bags and wallets made out of Capri Sun drinks, so it was really easy to ask fellow teachers to save the empty containers from their Valentine's Day parties.

For a small art fund raiser, Martinez collected fabric scraps and invited the sixth-graders to an afterschool session to make flower hair accessories. She said the kids really got into the project, making lots and lots of flowers, even on their own time at home.

Fifth-grade girls Savannah Burris, Kyra Loutensock, Maritza Quintana and Andrea Becerra model Christina Martinez's colorful pop can flower ring, headband and hair clip as well as a Capri Sun bag—made almost completely out of recycled materials.—Enterprise photo

"You do one small thing and it trickles." Teachers don't realize how much a small project like that can affect students, she said. The flowers gave the students a sense of accomplishment and strengthened their interest in art.

And since homemade items are so much more special than storebought things, according to Martinez, the community was very supportive in buying the handmade flowers, giving an extra boost to the art department budget.

Martinez admitted she is on "idea overload," with lots of new recycled art project ideas just waiting for her to try them.

She tends to hoard materials she thinks could come in handy later on, so she asks herself what she could do to use up those materials.

To get inspiration, Martinez browses YouTube or other websites. If she's at a craft fair or art convention, she'll take a picture of the things that appeal to her or she'll ask the vendor how they did that particular project.

As an artist, she of course has the liberty to change these ideas to suit her taste or to accommodate the materials she already has.

Pop can accessories are Martinez's latest obsession. She simply uses the metal from pop cans to form flowers for headbands and jewelry.

She's also had fun making a homemade cork board with old wine corks and an old frame, both

materials that would have just been thrown away from a past job. The project was completely free, except the glue Martinez purchased.

If anyone has a stash of old paper, fabric scraps or anything else they think would make a good art project, they should contact Martinez at Holyoke Elementary School, 970-854-3411.

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