This fall, the First Day School children embarked on an exciting collaborative project with artist Kevin Reese to create a mobile for the new stairwell, thanks to a generous donation from Mark Haskell and Elise Storck, in honor of former First Day School student Annelise Haskell.

We began the project by discussing the artist Alexander Calder who first began creating sculptures that moved in the 1920s, dubbed ‘mobiles’ by his friend Marcel Duchamp. We talked about how a mobile will move with the air currents, allowing you to see something new with every viewing, which makes it a wonderful vehicle for abstract artistic representation. It allows the viewer to find meaning that may not be literally represented.
For our project, we needed to decide on the theme for the mobile. We try to tie all our First Day School lessons to the SPICES – the Quaker testimonies of Simplicity, Peace, Integrity, Community, Equality and Stewardship – and these values provided a great starting point for us. As this mobile is the First Day School’s contribution to our new space, and this space is meant to provide a more welcoming and environmentally friendly place for our community to gather, we decided that a mobile evoking the values of community and stewardship of the land we live on and the air we breathe would be perfect. The children then began to create, drawing their ideas of community and stewardship that would provide inspiration for the mobile.

After that first lesson, Kevin took the children’s drawings and ideas and constructed a maquette, or small model, of the mobile for the second lesson. Some of the pieces of the mobile maquette were curved abstract shapes that would play against the clean straight lines of the stairway; others were leaves and clouds and stars more directly tying to our stewardship theme; and others were Keith Herring inspired people interacting with each other. Kevin and the children discussed ways they saw our themes in this design. The kids saw how the leaves and clouds and abstract shapes were evocative of nature and our commitment to stewardship, and suggested we use a blue-green color palate for them to further enhance that connection. They also appreciated how the people on the maquette were like a community, connected to each other and in balance with each other even as their relationships to each other changed and evolved, and how together they are greater than individuals set apart. We also
discussed materials: some of the pieces would be made from a light foam-core that the kids could craft and paint themselves, and others would be made from an environmentally friendly, recycled translucent ecoresin – with one ecoresin piece being an orange leaf as a nod to the season of the mobile’s creation. Then the children started crafting, using the maquette as inspiration, they drew their own abstract shapes on foam-core. With the help of Kevin, they cut out the pieces, sanded the edges, and even began to epoxy them to the wires that would form the armature of the mobile. The kids also posed for Kevin to draw the Keith Haring inspired figures, coming up with the positions they wanted the people to be in on the final mobile.
The next two sessions were all about painting. Kevin finished sanding the pieces the kids constructed, flame-proofed them, and epoxied them all to lengths of copper coated steel welding wire and thicker lengths of cold-rolled steel. The kids all learned the tricky art of painting mobile pieces: holding them in a way they don’t just spin in your hand and you don’t end up with paint all over yourself. The first painting day was especially exciting as the kids applied the first coat transforming the pieces from white foam-core to the vibrant palate of blues and greens they had chosen. The second painting day was the one that counts though, since the second coat is the one everyone will see. In between the painting days, we even did a First Day School field trip to the National Gallery of Art to see Calder’s monumental untitled mobile in the East Building’s central court.

For our final First Day School day lesson with Kevin, we held our balancing ceremony. Before we could begin, Kevin shared Alexander Calder’s first rule of mobiles: always build from the bottom up. So, guided by the maquette, we started with the ecoresin heart that would be the very bottom of the mobile and was connected to a teal tear drop piece. We found the point at which they balanced with the heart in place, and locked it in with a loop in the wire. Then one by one, the children came up to find the
balance point between what we had built so far and the next piece of the mobile, using their aesthetic judgements to help define how the pieces would relate to each other. We all watched entranced as the mobile grew piece-by-piece, wires taking on new curves and loops, shapes cantilevering out into the air, new relationships found in three-dimensional space. It was amazing to see the joy and wonder on the children’s faces as the artwork we had worked on so long together sprang to life.

Now the mobile hangs in the new stairwell, a work of art to enliven and beautify our space for years to come. A mobile created by the children of the First Day School as an act of stewardship and a contribution to our community, embodying those very values in form and deed.

Allen Fawcett & Jake Ritting

Co-Clerks Religious Education Committee