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## Around Home Diorama drama

by Nancy Shohet West

Another third-grade Native American diorama, done. I know, I know, it's supposed to be the kids doing the work. And in general, it is. Sort of. For the most part.

But I can't feel too guilty. While it's true that none of my 8-year-old daughter's clay horses could have stood up if I hadn't made some critical structural improvements to their limbs, the bar has historically been set fairly low in Carlisle as far as third graders doing all their own work on this project. Everyone seems to concur that this is a family endeavor, even as we all claim the kids did it *almost entirely* themselves. Yes, another adult who looks closely enough at Holly's horses might guess that I had a hand in the sculpting, but was I really supposed to believe back when my elder child did this project that a third-grade classmate of his had the technical skills to rig up a fully functioning irrigation system with the clever use of an aquarium pump?

All of us parents bond at this time of year as we gripe about how much time this project has taken our children – and us. “That decides it, I am *definitely* not having a third child!” one of my friends snapped last week after helping her son put the finishing touches on his project. *Native American dioramas as a form of family planning?* I mused. Apparently for some people.

Although when you see the finished results it's hard not to get a little bit snide – wasn't the dad of the kid who built a three-tiered earth house profiled last year in *Architectural Digest*? – I've come to realize that this really isn't a matter of competition among families. The adults get involved because it's just so much fun. How many chances do we get to pull out the modeling clay and fashion little people, animals and structures? When in my regular work day do I get to design a lagoon in the Florida Everglades or splatter red paint to represent the blood of a successful buffalo hunt?

Ever since Holly and I started the project two weeks ago, it has become a daily activity, one step at a time. We gathered grass and glued it onto the floor of our cardboard box. We cut up felt to simulate a buffalo hide tepee. We molded a little fireplace, and placed next to it a little woman cooking a buffalo steak on a spit. It was like playing with a dollhouse again, losing myself in a world of miniatures where I could make things happen just by crafting the pieces.

And because earlier this fall Holly and I read the wonderful novel *The Indian in the Cupboard* together, I have to admit I secretly hoped when I slipped into Holly's room during the day to check on the diorama that I'd find our little brown clay people had mysteriously changed positions since we last worked on them.

But unlike the magical Iroquois chief who is transformed from plastic to alive in that children's book, ours stayed just as we left them, and that in itself posed something of a challenge. One of our Pawnee fellows was perfectly poised on his horse, aiming his toothpick arrow at his buffalo bounty; but the second man must have been out of balance somehow, because no matter how much we tried to rearrange him, he always seemed to be pointing his toothpick arrow at his hunting partner rather than the buffalo. “It's Dick Cheney!” my husband exclaimed when he came in to check on our progress.

Late last week, we were all invited to school to view the results. I was excited to see what the other families came up with, but I'm not sorry to think I won't have to do this project again. I had fun three years ago helping Tim re-create a Seminole scene in Florida; I had fun this year crafting the Pawnee on the Great Plains with Holly. But I'm ready for a rest from school projects.

And friends with older kids are already sending me dire warnings about the notorious Ninth Grade Leaf Project. I wonder if we could get our hands on a copy of that now, just in case we want to get a head start on the competition. No, I don't really mean that. It would be far too unethical and send a terrible message to my children. They need to learn to take pride in their work, regardless of its quality. And so for now, Holly and I will

both celebrate our lumpy buffalos, tippy horses, and men who can't shoot straight. Δ

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