



Cristian Michel (right) with Muzammil Ahmed and Bluey the parakeet

Bird in the Hand

IN SEPTEMBER, Cristian Michel was going about his day when he spied a couple of men comically attempting to capture a parakeet in the middle of the street in Shirlington. He grabbed his phone to record the mayhem, but then thought of his mom, who loved parakeets. He'd had several as a boy.

After the bird was retrieved, Michel, a youth soccer coach, offered to take it to the nearby Arlington Welfare League of Arlington, but the nonprofit was closed. So he took the little creature home for the night and posted a photo on social media.

By the next day, helpful Arlingtonians had found the bird's owners, leading Michel to the doorstep of Farzal Ahmed's house in Alcova Heights. That's when he learned that the bird was named Bluey, and that it was one of three brand-new pets that had escaped the day before when their cage was accidentally left unlatched. Ahmed's children, Muzammil, 4, and Maira, 2, had been crestfallen. "Even though the other two are gone, at least we have [Bluey] back," Ahmed says. "[My son] doesn't want to let him go."



Painted rocks by the Reid family

Rocks of Love

LAST YEAR, Lara Reid's family moved to Lima, Peru, for her husband's job with the State Department. They'd been there six months when they were told to return to the U.S. due to the pandemic.

They temporarily settled into a Lyon Park rental house, where a friend welcomed them back to Arlington with toys, bikes, household items and a large, hand-painted rock that read "Love."

A few weeks later, Reid and her children, Sophie, 11, and Mateo, 9, began hand-painting their own rocks and leaving them on their front steps for passersby to enjoy. Reid, a former teacher at Saint Charles Early Childhood Education Center in Clarendon, says the project kept them grounded during a time when they were living out of suitcases and constantly adjusting.

The stoop has become a neighborhood landmark, of sorts. Reid says she overhears people commenting on their mini masterpieces. One visitor told her that finding new rocks had become a highlight for her and her toddler. "It's therapeutic for me to make them, but it's even more therapeutic to see the reactions when people walk by," she says. "It warms my heart knowing they make people smile."



Adriana Sagrera's recycled crayons

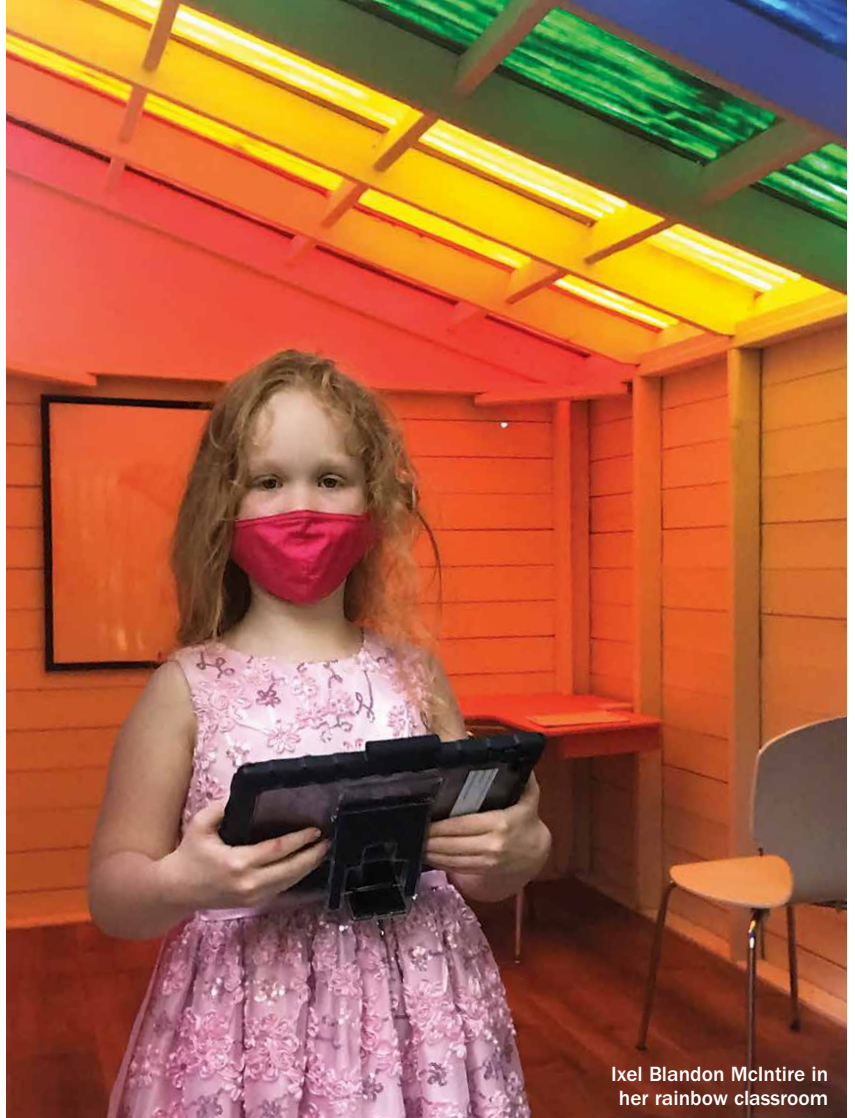
Wax On

AFTER LOSING HER nonprofit job due to the pandemic, Adriana Sagrera volunteered to help out at a local Real Food for Kids distribution site. She knew food wasn't the only thing area kids needed.

She posted a request for arts and crafts supplies on Facebook and received a flood of donations. She then sorted and grouped the materials—everything from colored pencils and buttons to construction paper—into activity packs that could be handed out to students in tandem with free meals, averaging about 175 packs a week throughout the summer.

In September, she had another idea. "I was trying to figure out what to do with bags and bags of old, broken crayons, and I thought, *Why not make them into something fun!*" She started melting the crayon nubs down and resurrecting the wax into new shapes, first with Lego molds, then branching out with holiday-themed molds, like skulls for Halloween. At press time, her activity bags had been distributed to students from three Arlington elementary schools—Claremont, Randolph and Drew.

COURTESY PHOTOS



Ixel Blandon McIntire in her rainbow classroom

An Upcycled Rainbow

WHEN ARLINGTON SCHOOLS shifted to remote classes last spring, 8-year-old Fleet Elementary student Ixel Blandon McIntire had trouble with the change. Her special needs made it difficult for her to focus in her family's small Penrose home. So her dad devised a solution.

In mid-June, after planning and pricing out how much it would cost to build a study shed in the side yard, John McIntire posted a request for two-by-fours in his local "Buy Nothing" Facebook group. His food truck, Mac's Donuts, had been sidelined at the beginning of the pandemic and money was tight. Crowdsourcing seemed like the best option.

Neighbors donated spare wood. One directed him to a pile of discarded materials up for grabs near the former Patrick Henry Elementary. Someone had paint. Others offered a chair, a heater and a clock. In the end, more than 25 neighbors contributed to the effort. "People came out of nowhere and were ready to help us," says Ixi Barrios Blandon, Ixel's mother.

Ixel herself helped with the building process. She carried materials, helped dig the foundation hole, hammered nails and painted, naming the shed Rainbow Elementary—a reference to its hand-painted, corrugated plastic roof, which allows soft sunlight to shine in, whereas windows at eye level would have been distracting for the young student.

In August, Rainbow Elementary was complete, with a desk, a reading corner and a list of affirmations hanging on the wall—basic building blocks for a successful (albeit atypical) school year.