



'A HUGE HIT'

Families love Gilchrist's online exhibit of 1,000 pieces of student art

Amanda Karioth Thompson Council on Culture & Arts

All year, Victoria Mendenhall and her art students have been steadily working towards their first ever school-wide art exhibition. Every one of Gilchrist Elementary School's 920 students were going to be represented in the show and many of them had planned to serve as docents, guiding family and friends through the exhibit. **See EXHIBIT, Page 6C**

Dax Durrenberger created a folk art inspired floral bouquet using a variety of media and a resist painting technique. SPECIAL TO THE DEMOCRAT

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Tucker Couch used vibrant blues and greens for his portrait inspired by Canadian painter Sandra Silberzweig. SPECIAL TO THE DEMOCRAT

Exhibit

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There were plans for a glow-in-the-dark gallery and other fun surprises but when the pandemic hit, all those plans changed.

Mendenhall and her students were understandably disappointed when it became clear they could not move forward with a physical exhibit. Instead, Mendenhall did what all good art teachers do, she got creative. She digitally scanned nearly 1,000 individual pieces of student artwork and uploaded them to the school's website, creating an online exhibit. She also recorded videos that showcased the artistic process for each project.

"It was a huge hit," Mendenhall said. "I received feedback from both parents and students. They were all so happy with the result, as was I."

One of those parents was Lindsay Durrenberger. Her son Dax Durrenberger just completed second grade and his multi-media artwork features a folk art inspired floral bouquet. Seeing his creativity displayed in this way was moving to Durrenberger, who shared "Dax's beautiful artwork brought tears to my eyes."

For this project, Mendenhall encouraged Dax and his second-grade classmates to think about elements of art including pattern and line while practicing a rest painting technique for the background. Because students had a wide variety of materials to choose from, the resulting artworks are unique and highlight the students' own personal taste and aesthetic preferences.

Fourth-graders were tasked with creating portraits inspired by Sandra Silberzweig, a contemporary Canadian painter. Silberzweig has a neurological condition called synesthesia where the stimulation of one sense activates another unrelated sense. In Silberzweig's case, visual art is processed in her mind's eye, then experienced on all sensory levels; sound, sight, touch, smell, and taste. She is attracted to colorful images and Mendenhall challenged her students to make bold



Gilchrist art teacher Victoria Mendenhall guides a student before coronavirus struck. AMANDA THOMPSON

color choices in their portraits.

One particularly striking piece was created by Tucker Couch who used a palette of vibrant blues and greens. When displayed online together, the students' artworks have a kaleidoscopic effect that Tucker especially appreciated. He said he "enjoyed seeing everyone's representations of the assignments and all of the colors."

His mom, Betsy Couch, was also impressed by the digital gallery and by the amount of work Mendenhall put into creating it. "It obviously took a lot of time, care, and coordination to build the website, and it is so incredibly special," she said. "Both of our kids spent about 30 minutes looking through all of the art."

She added it's teachers like Mendenhall that "make Gilchrist special and she has seen a whole new side to them since the pandemic. I learned that my stu-

dents are so resilient. They are succeeding in a time that is completely unprecedented, making beautiful works with what they have at home."

Students have been creating with their families and sending her photos of their artwork which has been "a major bright spot" for Mendenhall.

"Having students reach out to me, hearing that they're teaching their younger siblings or parents my lessons, it's such a proud moment for me as a teacher," she added. "The arts are so important during a time like this because it keeps kids creating and gives them a sense of normalcy in the unknown."

To view the Gilchrist Elementary School Virtual Art Show, visit grizzylarearea.com/art/virtual-art-show.

As part of COCA's Creativity Persists collection, this article highlights how area arts educators have used distance learning to teach and inspire during the COVID-19 pandemic. Amanda Karioth Thompson is the Assistant Director for the Council on Culture & Arts.

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