

'I miss sharing the world'

GIFT OF ART SUPPLIES HELP STUDENTS EXPRESS THEMSELVES

Amanda Karioth Tompson Special to Tallahassee Democrat | USA TODAY NETWORK – FLORIDA

Though Jessica Barthle is relatively new to the classroom, she has come to understand a lot about her art students during her past two years at Rickards High School. Most of that knowledge has been acquired in the last few months as a result of the pandemic. • Like everyone else, students at Rickards have struggled to adjust to the new normal. Many of them and their families face additional hurdles that make current circumstances even more challenging, from worries as acute as housing and food insecurity to a simple lack of access to art materials. • Prior to the pandemic, on a fairly regular basis, many of Barthle's students expressed not having supplies at home. She'd lend them materials on a case by case basis but, once schools shut down, that was no longer possible. Knowing her students needed a creative outlet, Barthle decided to equip them all with the tools they'd need to express themselves while sheltering at home. See SUPPLIES, Page 5C

Sofia McClarnon's multi-media artwork represents her loss of external connections. SPECIAL TO THE DEMOCRAT



Supplies

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"I had zero dollars left in my budget," she said but that didn't deter her. "I desperately took to Facebook and asked people to buy stuff from an Amazon wish list I had created. I honestly didn't think we were going to be able to get everything, but at the last minute this really wonderful woman offered to buy everything I was missing. I cried. I cried a lot," Barthle admitted.

Due to the generosity of that angel investor and other community members, Barthle collected nearly \$800 in materials which allowed her to create 150 individual art supply packets to distribute as gifts for her students to keep. With her boyfriend's help, she organized all of her students' addresses to establish a delivery route. "Over the course of about two weeks, we saw almost all of Leon County making these deliveries."

"Those kids and those parents glowed when I showed up, out of nowhere, with a bag full of goodies for them. They missed school, community, and having a place where they know they're loved and cared for outside of home. I can't begin to say how much self-control it took to socially distance and not smother hug all of them."

With deliveries made, students dug into the activities Barthle designed for them. The first lesson, titled "A memorial to my past life," explored the work of contemporary American artist Andy Goldsworthy and challenged students to think about ephemeral artwork. After reflecting on what they've lost as a result of the virus, students produced an ephemeral shrine to honor that loss.

Students then created multi-media artworks which further examined how these losses have affected them personally. The compositions incorporated a variety of techniques and materials using their new art supply packets which contained National Geographic magazines for collage, colored pencils and markers for drawing, and watercolors for painting.

Emily Taylor is a ninth-grader and her artwork depicts the abrupt fracture of her daily life. "I now have to do my schoolwork at home and wear a mask if I leave the house. My art shows my places of learning before and during quarantine," she said.

Ninth-grader Faith Register had to give up softball. "My season at school was cut in more than half. I also can't play for the city as of now. I've also given up seeing many of my friends and loved ones." Using collage techniques, Faith expressed how her life has been broken up and reassembled to create something new and different.



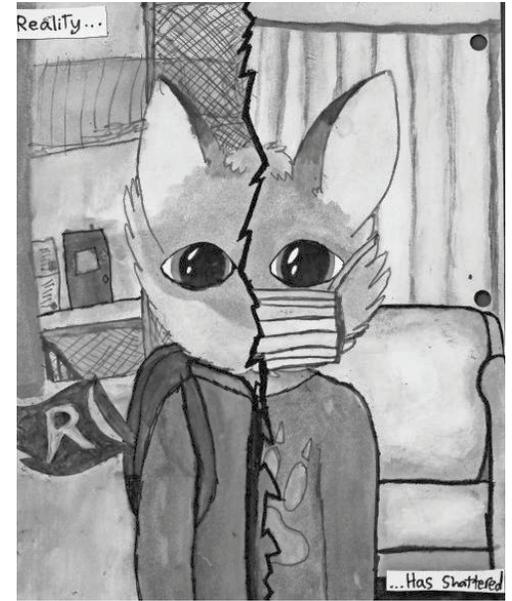
Faith Register chose collage techniques to convey how her life has been broken up and reassembled
PHOTOS SPECIAL TO THE DEMOCRAT

In reflecting on this assignment, 10th-grader Rashaad Eppes realized that he has "learned and gained more than I have given up. Now I meditate and read from time to time. I'm drawing more and being more present. For me it's been a change in how I feel, and I feel much happier."

While Rashaad has found a sense of internal fulfillment, 10th-grader Sofia McClarnon feels the loss of external connections. She said "I miss sharing the world with other people. When I would wander around or take the bus, I was awkward and avoided talking to people, but I liked being in the world and doing things, having goals and plans."

Barthle also grieves the loss of social connections, especially with her students, and recognized many of them feel similarly. To address that, she created a culminating art activity.

She asked each student to create a "quarantine companion," using the googly eyes, pipe cleaners, pom-poms, craft sticks and salt dough from their packets. Salt dough is a clay-like material that served



Ninth grader Emily Taylor depicts the abrupt fracture of her daily life.

as the base for a sculpted figure that would accompany students throughout their life in social isolation.

Barthle introduced students to the work of contemporary Japanese miniature artist Tatsuya Tanaka. Like him, students would create a tiny figure and photographically document their adventures together, creating a social connection, though an imaginary one.

Though Barthle looks ahead to the upcoming school year with trepidation, she's eager to reestablish her real-life connections with her students.

"I never got to speak with them after March, make sure they were OK, let them know how much I love and care for them. Despite the insane amount of work the packets presented, both in assembly and delivery, being able to see and visit my kids, even just for a brief moment, meant the absolute world to me."

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. COCA is the capital area's umbrella agency for arts and culture (www.tallahasseearts.org).