

# Eighth-graders take art messages to public spaces

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“There’s a lot more meaning to public art than meets the eye, when you start to dig into it.” That’s Sarah Pellor’s take and, over the past several weeks, she has dug deep.

An eighth-grade art student at Fort Braden School, she and her fellow classmates have not only explored nationally and internationally renowned public artists, they’ve also learned about our own community’s public art and the people who create it. Even more exciting, they got an opportunity to contribute to the conversation in a tangible way by cre-

ating public art themselves.

Heather Clark is the art teacher at Fort Braden and she applied for and received an Art Education Grant from the Council on Culture & Arts to develop and initiate a special public art unit for her students. With the grant funds, she was able to purchase materials and supplies for her students to become public artists. But first, they needed some context.

“We looked at the work of Shepard Fairey and Keith Haring and other public artists. We talked about the power of visual images in the public place.” The

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Heather Clark, left, and a volunteer install the student artworks in Art Alley. PAUL RUTKOVSKY

# Art

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students also used COCA's online Outdoor Public Art Directory to study more than 200 public artworks in Tallahassee. "I wanted to show them lots of different examples of artists who use public art as a means to express their ideas and opinions about various subjects in their own community," explained Clark.

In collaborative groups, students discussed issues that were important to them. Ideas ranged from environmental conservation and endangered animals to homelessness and women's rights. After completing in-depth research, Clark challenged them to come up with imagery that represented the topics and presented positive, solution oriented messages.

Working on plywood panels, students developed their own artworks slated for public display in Art Alley, a community art space that connects Gaines Street to St. Francis Street. While Clark stepped in to support and assist as needed, the projects were guided entirely by the art students themselves.

"It's really important to me to involve students in the whole decision-making process, giving them the freedom. Creating an environment where they feel safe and their ideas are important and valid. I want my kids to know that their ideas matter and could actually be in a public setting where lots of people can take in their message."

Sarah Pellor's group focused on gay rights and, using the bright colors of the LGBTQ flag, the students carefully composed design elements to communicate their thoughts visually. "A lot of people are hurt by mean words and we should think more about acceptance. It's about being equal and not being judged by who we love. I hope our artwork will help to open people's eyes."

After completing this unit of study, Sarah believes that one of the biggest benefits of public art relates to its accessibility. "Public art is a good way to express your ideas because everyone can see it, it's not locked up in a museum where you have to pay to see it."

As a culmination to the work art students did in the classroom, COCA led them on a guided outdoor public art walking tour of the All Saints district where they saw their original artworks on display. They also stopped into The Plant, a public creative work space, to add their mark to the world's largest doodle, an on-going collaborative art project.

Carlos Velazquez especially enjoyed this real-world component of the lesson and he said "I've seen some satisfying art on the public art walk and it offers me a lot of inspiration."

Carlos is an eighth-grader and an accomplished artist. For the past three years, he's diligently worked on his style and technique, but this public art project stretched him in new ways. Carlos was challenged to think beyond the imagery he typically produces and was encouraged to use his artistic skills for social justice.

"My team focused on the topic of racism and I hope viewers walk away with a little bit of a change in their mind about what's going on. Maybe they'll do something to help out and make this world a better place."

That's what Clark hopes too. "For me, child authentic art like this is really meaningful and beautiful. I try to promote that as much as I can and motivate them and inspire them to invest in their ideas and be productive and express themselves. Learning about art in public places makes us more aware of art and images and how they can affect us, make us think, and possibly act on things we are moved by."

*Amanda Karioth Thompson is the Interim Executive Director for the Council on Culture & Arts. COCA is the capital area's umbrella agency for arts and culture ([www.tallahasseearts.org](http://www.tallahasseearts.org)).*