



Sissi Zhang paints a tribute to LeRoy Collins while other campers work on their artworks. PHOTOS BY AMANDA THOMPSON

# ‘I can do something’

## ‘FOOTSOLDIERS’ CAMP BRINGS CIVIL RIGHTS INTO FOCUS

Amanda Karioth Thompson Council on Culture & Arts

There’s a time machine in Tallahassee. It’s not at the MagLab or in some kook’s garage, it’s the State Archives of Florida located in the R.A. Gray Building. This treasure trove of historically significant records, manuscripts, photographs and other materials is accessible to anyone who wants to experience another era.

Recently, a group of local teenagers visited the archives as part of a summer camp called “Footsoldiers: Change Makers Then & Now” to better understand the local civil rights movement of the 1950s and 60s. The camp was inspired by the Civil Rights Heritage Sidewalk, a public art installation honoring more than 50 “footsoldiers” who participated in Tallahassee’s bus boycott and lunch counter sit-ins.

Led by students and faculty members in the FSU Art Education department and funded by the university’s Arts and Humanities Program Enhancement Grant, the camp focused on conceptualizing and creating socially

conscious artwork.

Danielle Henn, a doctoral student in art education, was one of the camp leaders. She said the goal was for participants to make “concrete connections between history and their lives today. The Civil Rights movement can feel a little abstract or far away, especially when you’re a kid.” Her hope was that this camp would help shorten the degrees of separation.

Campers got an overview of the national civil rights movement, then visited local landmarks like Bethel Missionary Baptist Church and the C.K. Steele bus plaza in addition to the state archives.

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Lydia Moss, standing, was involved in the camp’s development from its earliest stages. Here she works with a camper who’s writing a song. Moss said “there is no one way to learn or experience history.”



Using a variety of media, techniques and even artistic disciplines, campers expressed their responses to what they learned.

PHOTOS BY AMANDA THOMPSON

## Camp

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Campers toured Frenchtown and heard from living legends of the civil rights movement.

In the days that followed, campers incorporated what they'd learned into poignant artworks, using a technique called creative remix.

By altering text, images or sounds, remixes often speak to broad political or social messages and offer the artist's interpretation of and response to the original material. Campers were presented with the work of other artists who work in this way including Kara Walker and Willie Cole.

Henn explained, "the questions you have to ask to be able to make a work of art about something are far deeper than if you just had to report on it or summarize what you've learned. To go a step further and figure out how to put it out into the world, that requires perspective taking."

It also requires consideration of how that artwork may be interpreted by others and Henn addressed that with campers as well. "You have to be careful about unintentionally saying something that you don't mean. We discussed appropriation and the importance of the materials that are used. The example that gets used in art education a lot is when we recreate totem poles out of toilet paper rolls. What does that say? It matters. That's a pretty contemporary practice."

A regular volunteer at the public library, Sissi Zhang, 17, painted a tribute to LeRoy Collins. "I knew he was a governor and that the library was named for him, but I never really thought it was interesting," she confessed. Sissi's deep dive into the state archives changed her opinion completely. She was inspired by Collins' commitment to "progress under law" and his unpopular political and moral stance as the first Southern governor to advocate for segregation's end.

She can retell Collins' story in detail, adding her own analysis along the way. She's turned her new knowledge inward and admitted "unfortunately, I've learned stereotypes and that's something I'm embarrassed about. Realizing that appearances don't tell a person's story, we should take the time to sit down with a person and get to know them."

Charlotte Hager, agrees which might be expected because the civil rights movement is in her blood. "I have a great-grandmother who was alive at that time and was very supportive of desegregating schools. I like to talk to her about that," the 13-year-old said. Charlotte was moved to create artwork inspired by photographs she found in the state archive. In the process, she said "I've learned much more about the people who were foot soldiers in Tallahassee and I think it was a really good experience for me."

The most compelling part of the camp for 17-year-old Mariama Jannah was the interview with Henry Steele. One of the campers asked if Steele had been scared during the lunch counter sit-ins. Mariama recalls "he said he was fearless because 'when you've been done wrong your whole life, you'll do anything.' That really stood out to me and I used that as the centerpiece for my project."

Mariama carved the image of "a man who's really tired and all the life has been sucked out of him" into a linoleum block. She then printed the image multiple times, mimicking repetitive degradation. Reflecting on her camp experience, she said "it made me think, I can really do something."

"Kids think they can't do a lot and this has changed my viewpoint. All the issues that are going on, they affect us too, so we should have an opinion about it. Opportunities like this can open a whole new door. Maybe a kid in this camp right now will change society or the world."

The campers' creations may be viewed through Aug. 10 from 8 a.m.-7 p.m. in the first-floor lobby of FSU's William Johnston Building (143 Honors Way). A public, closing reception will be held on Aug. 10 from 5:30-6:30 p.m.

Amanda Kariath 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](http://www.tallahasseearts.org)).



Inspired by Henry Steele's story, Mariama Jannah created prints from a hand-carved linoleum block.