



Students held hands and listened to each other's well wishes. AMANDA THOMPSON

Creative coping

Art teacher helps students process scary emotions

Amanda Karioth Thompson Council on Culture & Arts

Alice Strom has lived through a few hurricanes in her young life. In the past, she has simply thought of them as bad rainstorms with the loss of power as the biggest inconvenience. "Usually, I'm not that worried," she said. "But now that I'm in fifth grade, I put a lot more thought into things. I was worried about this one."

She described her first inkling of Hurricane Michael's building force. "I was standing outside and I could feel the wind and it was really strong even the day before. I was watching everything blow

See ART, Page 3D



Alice Strom created a self-portrait depicting the gathering winds prior to Hurricane Michael's landfall. AMANDA THOMPSON

Art

Continued from Page 1D

and that's when I started to get nervous." During the worst of it, Alice recalled, "we heard transformers blow, which was a little scary."

The storm cut a swath through the Big Bend. Tallahassee fared better than other areas which were decimated. Many people lost everything. "I'm worried for them," said Alice. "I also don't know what to think."

This kind of anxiety and bewilderment can be a challenge for children who have been through a traumatic episode. It can affect learning and development but Alice's art teacher, Wafa Elaska, can help. She teaches at Hartfield Elementary School where the faculty and staff receive specialized trauma-informed training.

Elsaka has also learned from her personal experiences. She grew up in occupied Gaza City and still has family there. She identifies with the concept of unrest and how it can traumatize. In response to a call put out by the Council on Culture & Arts for hurricane relief arts volunteers, Elaska visited emergency shel-

ters in the most affected areas.

She was joined by Mary Beth McBride, an integrated holistic care healer and physician assistant. Together, they provided art making opportunities for the children and adults they encountered.

"House, after house, after house, all the drywall, clothes, kitchen cabinets, dressers, washers, dryers, all outside. People sitting in front of their door just blank. No body or eye communication. For 20 miles every tree is like somebody snapped it, damage as far as your eye can see. It's a war zone and they aren't familiar with a war zone but I am."

Between the images on TV and in the paper, radio broadcasts and daily conversations, children, even those in relatively unscathed areas like Tallahassee, are well aware of the situation at hand. They often have emotions and thoughts they can't articulate verbally. But they can express their feelings through art.

Kamari Thomas is a fifth-grader at Hartsfield. His family evacuated to Orlando and his home was undamaged in the hurricane. Though he hasn't seen the effects of the storm firsthand, he is aware of what others are going through. "I heard about Panama City. One of their school gymnasiums got torn. It makes

me feel horrible. We can go to school but they can't," said Kamari. He added, making art about the storm "helped me determine how I felt."

In the face of destruction, the act of creation is empowering, especially for children who often feel helpless. Alice and Kamari are two of more than two dozen after-school art club students. In an effort to help them process their feelings about the storm, Elaska guided these students through art making activities. This aligns with a school-wide adoption of the conscious discipline approach. Utilizing everyday events, conscious discipline cultivates emotional intelligence through self-regulation and social-emotional learning.

"I always connect art to daily life and when Hurricane Michael hit, there was a lot for them to bring out," said Elaska. "If they're feeling scared, those are feelings we need to cope with. They can bring them into a drawing, a painting, a line, a color. I want them to start feeling these emotions. They're raw and important."

"There's something about us as humans and our brain. It keeps wanting to focus on those painful things. By making a piece of artwork, or even just looking at artwork, that image might replace

a few images of the memory. Memories get full and you replace it with something else." For people suffering from the aftereffects of trauma, forgetting can be an important part of recovery.

In addition to asking her students to create imagery, Elaska also encouraged them to compose well wishes to those who are still struggling. Sitting in a circle, holding hands, the students each said their well wishes out loud. The exercise culminated in the group sending their collective love and positive energy toward those who needs it most.

"I want my students to be able to connect their inner heart to their inner brain," Elaska said. "If we can feed them with good intentions and good thinking, the seed will be planted. Those important feelings in the arts are part of us and they will help us. If they are able to differentiate and be conscious about feelings, it's going to inform their actions. It'll connect us to each other, our community, our world. It makes us better people."

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).