



A Maclay student strings beads for an empathy bracelet. KYLE MAUREY

Circle of caring

Maclay students
embrace empathy
with eM bracelets

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At a point in history when humanity feels more fractured than ever, empathy has become a topic of great interest. Empathy allows us to make meaningful connections across diverse experiences and with those who are different than us. As documented in peer-reviewed articles and studies from psychology departments across the globe, it appears that empathy is on the decline. Fingers are pointed in a multitude of directions and everything from politics to social media is taking the blame.

In the past few decades, our education system has emphasized the teaching of subjects thought to prepare students for a more competitive and technologically complex job market. Those learning experiences are important but they often exist at the expense of others which allow students to develop creative capacities and emotional intelligence. Literature, foreign languages, humanities, and the arts are uniquely suited for this purpose and they de-

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An example of an empathy bracelet and some of the supplies used to create it. AMANDA THOMPSON

Bracelets

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mand that students practice empathy.

The art teachers at Maclay School understand that empathy is a positive outcome of a complete education and they have developed an artful way to help reverse the concerning downward trend. Kim Daniel, middle school art teacher, felt inspired to embed empathy into the art curriculum since it “builds a positive classroom culture, strengthens community and prepares our students for leadership.”

Daniel conceived of a project that Maclay’s entire visual arts team embraced. They brainstormed, each providing input, and the Maclay eM bracelets project emerged. “One spark just led to a full-blown firecracker of an idea with a lesson that packs a punch,” said Daniel.

Upper school art teacher Kyle Maurey explained that, through the project, participants will be working to raise awareness of empathy with the universal and unspoken language of art. “We will be creating beads and bracelets to connect our school with the community by offering a way to thank someone that has had a positive influence on your life. By creating hand-made bracelets we can open up the conversation about empathy and what it means to care for someone.”

Kaitlyn Dressel also teaches art in the upper school and she said the project “is very simple but it unites everybody. When you see everyone wearing a friendship bracelet, it’s noticeable, it’s impactful.”

While the bracelet itself is a visible manifestation of empathetic practices, the “eM” charm included on each one takes it one step further. “We were wondering, should we put the letter “M” on the charm for Maclay but we wanted it to expand further than the school. We came up with all these other ideas for the charm including the letters ‘em’ for empathy and then we noticed it spells ‘me’ backward. The charm became a reminder about putting others before yourself.”

The project was awarded a Maclay Faculty Excel-

lence Grant which allowed the teachers to purchase extra supplies and materials, expanding the project’s reach to the entire school, kindergarten through 12th grade. Dressel said, “we wanted this to be a campus-wide and community-wide project. We wanted to be able to send it to everyone’s classroom so you don’t have to be in an art class to make them.”

A toolkit including detailed instructions, clay, glaze, string, supplies, and eM charms will be provided to classrooms throughout the school and available in the art rooms at all times. Students and teachers can follow the directions to sculpt beads and small plaques out of clay, finish them with a variety of glazes, and string the bracelets which can then be given as gifts.

“They can put their friends’ initials on it, or do different designs, write a message in the clay if they want to,” said Dressel. “We have small notecards that they fill out where they can add their own story and the meaning behind how they came up with their bracelet design. When they hand it to that person, they get a backstory and a personal story of the creator and why they made it.”

Eleventh-grader Grace Wells is inspired by the bracelet project and what the tangible objects represent. “I like symbols a lot,” she said. “I think symbols are very powerful.” She is currently researching the decline of empathy and feels the project is “something that can help build empathy up more and give new ways for us to show it.” The vehicle for doing so is also meaningful to Grace who believes that “art has a way of connecting to people.”

Dressel had similar sentiments and added “sometimes it can be difficult to express ourselves in our own language. We find mental blocks or we’re scared and we don’t know how to say something the right way. The visual arts are an outlet. There’s no barrier, art truly connects us all.”

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).