

Teacher brings the right amount of silly to art class

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Council on Culture & Arts

Killearn Lakes Elementary school art teacher Billy Penn is willing to bet he has the coolest classroom in Leon County. Inhabiting the room since its construction, Penn says the architectural aesthetic of the room itself is one of a kind. The top half of a giant circular window serves as its main focal point, while life-size cutouts of artists like Frida Kahlo and Vincent Van Gogh stand sentry, ushering in a new generation of creatives.

Penn and his students' artwork aren't contained by his classroom, however, as evidenced by four original, leprechaun-themed murals found on the school's walls that are inspired by Killearn's heritage as well as the school's name.

Each year, the fifth-grade class helps Penn paint a one-of-a-kind image. He starts by sketching on the computer, then projects and outlines the scene onto the wall. From there, Penn encourages the art club, and any students passing by who want to help, to grab a smock and get painting.

"Music has concerts and PE has field day, so I thought, 'What could I do?'" says Penn, who is in his fifth year at Killearn Lakes. "The cool thing is that even as those events come and go, our murals are still here."

The Annual Winter Festival Youth Art Exhibition, on display in City Hall Gallery through Jan. 22, is another place where Penn proudly showcases his students' work. Excited to share their art with Tallahassee, Penn fondly recalls how his mother always kept his own drawings on display. He remembers one of his first pieces at age 4 of the alien from the movie "E.T. the Extra-terrestrial," but is puzzled when his students ask him when he became an artist.

"I always wonder why don't you think of yourself as an artist now," says Penn. "I've been drawing since I was 2 like everyone else. I don't define myself as an artist. That's up to other people."

Leon County Schools molded Penn — from his time at Kate Sullivan Elementary School all the way through Tallahassee Community College and Florida State University. In seventh grade, he won his first art contest. Penn designed the logo for Greater Gator Golf and Games. This meant he was able to paint part of a mural on a wall near the — at the time — new Governor's Square Mall.

Drawing and painting were the two mediums that always spoke to Penn. His achievements in both led to his first paying gig as an artist in middle school when he designed the back to school cover of the Tallahassee Democrat. Penn jokes that even as he earned his high school diploma, AA degree, a degree in art education, and nearly 16 years of teaching, he always felt his true calling was that of a comic book artist.

"I gravitated towards comics because



Billy Penn's classroom with circular window and life-size cutouts of artists like Frida Kahlo and Vincent Van Gogh. JOSEPH PENN

they were low-brow, entertaining, disposable, fun, and no one else was into them," admits Penn. "I learned more from reading interviews with creators, even as a teenager."

Shortly after embarking on his teaching career, Penn participated in a contest called Comic Book Idol and was one of the top 10 artists to compete. Each Friday he'd be given a new drawing assignment, and every Monday he would turn in a new comic. The competition sent him to San Diego for Comic-Con where he met with representatives from Platinum Studios, the publishing company that produced the comic "Cowboys and Aliens."

The company gave Penn the chance to create his own 88-page comic called "Hot Shot and Mighty Girl." It took him over a year to draw the story of two high school kids who stumble on bracelets that allow them to fly. Appreciative of the opportunity to practice his art and have his story published, Penn also embraces his comic book style in his teachings.

"The comic artist in me is always trying to find the new weird, though I don't wear my weird on my sleeve," laughs Penn. "I was drawing a self-portrait for second and third graders and when I got to the arms I made them gigantic and massive and they all got tickled by that. It's a good way to entertain."

Achieving the right amount of silly is an art form in itself for Penn. With a Rolodex of over eight hundred names rolling around in his head, he tries to always personalize his teaching so that each student feels seen and heard.

When picking up his kindergarten class, he is amazed by the amount of sharing — from their grandmother's birthdays to which teeth are wiggly — that his students will noisily, and sometimes overwhelmingly volunteer. Their enthusiasm is infectious; motivating Penn from the moment he steps into the parking lot to the final bell to make his class a fun and engaging experience.

"I've always equated being the art teacher to being the fun uncle," says Penn. "The teachers have to live with the kids and discipline them. When they

come to art we get to create things that they might not get to do in the classroom."

The diverse level of craftsmanship he experiences at the annual Winter Festival student art exhibition always impresses Penn, showcasing a wide breadth of work from all ages. He always looks forward to the downtown venue at City Hall, which "ups the ante" for parents and children alike, especially at the opening reception on Dec. 1.

This year, attendees will see two different types of drawings from Penn's classes. The first are cityscapes, where Penn has his students focus on drawing details and brainstorming out of the ordinary elements. He is also excited to share the "technology heads" projects. These drawings prompt students to re-

If you go

What: The Annual Winter Festival Youth Art Exhibition 2017

When: Opening Reception and Awards Ceremony, 6-7:30 p.m. Friday, Dec. 1, gallery open 8 a.m.-5 p.m., Monday-Friday through Jan. 22

Where: City Hall Gallery, 300 South Adams Street

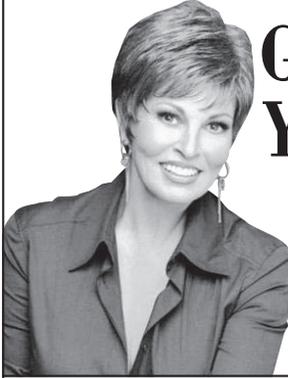
Cost: Free

Contact: For more information, call 850-224-2500 or visit <http://coca.tallahasseearts.org/art-in-public-places/city-hall-gallery>.

place different organs with machinery, syncing with their curriculum on learning the systems of the human body. It's a way for Penn to challenge his students, and he is always inspired by the results.

"People say art is the key that opens different parts of the brain, and I've found that to be true," states Penn. "I see art as a backdoor to learning, especially in elementary school. The students get to flex different muscles, and if they're looking forward to coming to school because it's an art day, then I feel I've done my job."

Amanda Sieradzki is the feature writer for the Council on Culture & Arts. COCA is the capital area's umbrella agency for arts and culture (www.tallahasseearts.org).



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