



The Beauty of Imperfection by Anthony Jefferson was part of a student art exhibition at Gadsden Arts. SPECIAL TO THE TALLAHASSEE DEMOCRAT

'Power in the art'

Gadsden teens make important connections working on Arts Council

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As a rite of passage, many teenagers get part time jobs to earn extra spending money and learn responsibility. While scooping ice cream, mowing lawns, or bagging groceries may not influence their ultimate choice of occupation, some teens get the opportunity to explore careers they've always dreamed of.

It's especially rewarding when young employees are able to contribute to the program development of a highly respected leader in the Florida art community like the accredited Gadsden Arts Center and Museum.

The organization's Teen Art Council is comprised of eager young people who have expressed an interest in learning more about the arts. The council came about through funding from Art Bridges, a group that supports innovative audience building projects de-



Members of the Teen Art Council with Gadsden Arts' Executive Director Grace Robinson outside the museum in Quincy. SPECIAL TO THE TALLAHASSEE DEMOCRAT

signed to increase community access to American art.

Gadsden Arts borrowed a painting from Arts Bridges for inclusion in a recent exhibition and, as part of that loan, they were eligible for grant support to connect with a new demographic.

"We're really great with elementary

school children and adults and seniors tend to come on their own. We have a good relationship with college professors who bring their classes but that teen audience, not so much," said Anissa Ford, Education Director. "We thought they would be a great audience to reach through this grant."



My America by Juanita Forehand. SPECIAL TO THE TALLAHASSEE DEMOCRAT

The teens are contracted to work at Gadsden Arts, meeting regularly to learn about the inner workings of a museum, the production of exhibitions and program development.

Council members also converse with guest artists who demonstrate their techniques. Most importantly, they advise staff on the kinds of activities that might bring more teens to the museum. "These are paid positions to work with

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me to develop programs by teens for teens," said Ford. "They're a really great sounding board for me."

The Teen Art Council has already produced a 2020 themed student art contest and a student art exhibition.

The student artworks included in that exhibit were created in response to Gadsden Arts' recent "Hofmann to Warhol" show which focused on Abstract Expressionism to Pop Art in post-WWII America. This exhibition included artists such as Hans Hofmann, Stuart Davis, Roy Lichtenstein, James Rosenquist, and Andy Warhol.

Ford explained, "each student had to research the artist they were inspired by and learn how to write statements about their own artworks, what they mean, and why they created them. Then they did a presentation. There is so much power in the art they made."

Juanita Forehand, Gadsden Teen Art Council member and 10th-grader at Gadsden County High School, chose Roy Lichtenstein's "Bicentennial" as her inspiration. "I see his piece as a very lighthearted celebration of America, and I don't have that same experience. I've seen many things that makes my experience different from that," she explained.

Juanita's artwork, titled "My America" is "about the BIPOC [Black, Indigenous and people of color] experience in this country full of uncertainty. To have the opportunity to voice that out was amazing."

In addition to being able to express herself through her artwork, Juanita has embraced the Teen Art Council experience and all the opportunities it has offered.

"It has been amazing, truly. With everything that's been going on with COVID, multiple things throughout last year and this year, it's been a place where I can home in on my love for art," Juanita said. "I've loved art for a long time and I've never had a place to really outlet myself besides my own room. There's multiple of things we've been introduced to and I appreciate it fully."

Anthony Jefferson feels similarly about being a

Teen Art Council member. As a 12th-grader at Gadsden County High School and a life-long art lover, he consciously used the experience to expand his horizons. "I need to dive into way more things instead of just closing myself off to just what I'm used to. I'm trying to say 'yes' to more things. I heard it was something in relation to art and I thought it would help me get used to being around other people."

Anthony was moved to create artwork inspired two different artists: James Rosenquist and Stuart Davis. "From Rosenquist's 'New Oxy,' I included a poem and an unfinished look, while from Davis' art I took inspiration from text and hidden messages."

Anthony included his own hidden message within his composition, prompting viewers to 'Look Up.' "My thought process was to remind the viewer to take a moment to look at the wonders that surround you on a day-to-day-basis. Look at it in its lovely imperfections."

Both Anthony and Juanita have plans to continue their study of art. Anthony is currently exploring art colleges including Full Sail University and the Savannah College of Art and Design. Juanita is aiming for Pratt Institute followed by a study abroad program at the Korea National University of Arts.

Ford also has her sights set on the future in hopes that the Teen Art Council can continue and she's mindful of the importance it might have in the career trajectory of these young people.

"I want to open their minds to all the different arts careers there are. High school is that time where some students start to get jobs, students start to think about careers and where they want to go next," Ford said. "If they're looking to apply to colleges maybe they need recommendations and I love to be a place where if someone's interest in art, they can come and talk to us. If we get to continue this program, I'd love to see, in ten years, these students in arts careers. That would be awesome."

This article is part of COCA's Creativity Persists collection and highlights how area educators are continuing to teach and inspire during the COVID-19 pandemic. 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).