



MEGAN O'NEILL
The group of Griffin students gathers outside of The Plant in the All Saints district.

TAKING IT TO THE STREET

GRIFFIN EIGHTH-GRADERS CREATE FIVE MURALS TO DISPLAY AT ART ALLEY

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Tallahassee recently introduced 21 new public artists to the community. Between them, they created five murals for display in Art Alley, the pedestrian thoroughfare that connects Gaines and St. Francis Streets. Though our city boasts more than 200 pieces of public artwork, many of them created by regionally, nationally, and internationally renowned artists, these most recent acquisitions were authored by a cohort of exciting emerging artists, all from Griffin Middle School.

Led by Nikki Nicolas, Griffin's art teacher, these students spent months collaborating on the design and execution of the 3' x 3' panels. Nicolas explained that she envisioned the project to "show them, from start to finish, the process of creation. It allowed them to see that if you're confident in something and you see it through to the end, it can be an inspiration to other people, regardless of whether you're a professional or an eighth-grader."

Nicolas coordinated the installation of the five murals as well as a special field trip that featured a public art walk led by the Council on Culture & Arts. After touring the All Saints district, the students came to Art Alley, where they viewed their own artworks displayed in a public setting.

Eighth-grader Ashanti Miller was bubbling over about the experience and her contribution. "It feels great to be a public artist. Every time people pass by, they're going to see me and my friends' artwork." Nicolas challenged her students to create works with positive and uplifting themes. Ashanti and her creative team designed a mural



Students collaborated on the concept, design, and fabrication of the five public artworks.



Five new murals have been installed to enhance Tallahassee's public art collection.

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centered on a tree of life surrounded by the mantra live, laugh, love. "I can't stand people being sad so I wanted to make something that would make everybody smile. Art expresses more emotions than you can imagine."

Nicolas was glad to see the culmination of the project and her students' reactions to their work. "I think they were amazed. I don't think that they really believed that it was going to get done. It was really fun to see



them just be in awe. They were going 'oh, wow,' and pointing, and they were just really, really excited."

Aside from her own artwork, Ashanti enjoyed the "Before I Die Wall" located on Gaines Street which was part of COCA's public art tour. All of the students had the opportunity to chalk their own dreams for the future onto this inter-

active installation. Ashanti shared that "it makes people think, 'what do I want to do when I grow up?' I wrote, 'I want to change lives, build buildings, and learn how to forgive and forget.'"

Eighth-grader Daniel Parishani was also a fan of the "Before I Die Wall." On it, he wrote "live life, as in, live life well, don't waste it."

Having only lived in Tallahassee for two years, Daniel was unfamiliar with the All Saints area. After touring the neighborhood and seeing the diversity of artworks, he realized that public art "is a really big part of this city."

Daniel felt good about making his own contribution to our community's public art scene and his team's timely and socially conscious message. The theme of "black lives matter is an inspiration to me, so I think it would be an inspiration to other people too." He hopes that the five Griffin murals "show joy, bravery, and no racism," and serve as "a reminder that you can help people by creating art."

Pleased with the project's outcome, Nicolas said her students "came together to create ideas. They had to sometimes let go of an idea in order for the group to move forward and I was proud of them for their flexibility and perseverance."

Aside from their murals, students also added to the world's largest doodle at The Plant, a community-based art collective managed by Paul Rutkovsky, the driving force behind Art Alley and a frequent supporter of local art teachers and students. This additional creative experience was yet another way for students to support their community and be part of something larger than themselves.

"For the majority of the students that I work with, they don't get a chance to extend their horizons beyond the few streets in their neighborhood around their school," said Nicolas. "I think it is really important for them to see the variety and the talent in our public art. I hope it inspires them to reach further than what they thought was possible."

One of the younger students in this high school credit art class, seventh-grader Sarah Glass felt "inspired because of the art. It makes me feel tingly inside like I want to do something special." Reflecting on COCA's public art tour and her own creation, Sarah said "public art is important because of the feeling it gives. Art is for everybody to enjoy. It lets me know there are choices. It makes me realize that if everything fails, I know I have art."

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).