

# Discovered art brings history to life at Nims

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The creation of art is one of the most powerful forms of resistance and can serve as a historical snapshot and a therapeutic tool during times of suffering.

Teodora Verbitskya and her daughter Nadia Verbitsky understood this all too well. They lived in Ukraine during the murderous regimes of Stalin and Hitler. Verbitskya wrote poignantly of her experiences as a wife and mother, including her imprisonment in a labor camp. Verbitsky created haunting paintings that visually illustrate her mother's memoirs and her own recollections of the time.

It is purely by chance that these works have come to light. They were discovered in Florida by Mimi Shaw, a local educator and business owner, underneath a dilapidated stilt house slated for demolition. She purchased the works and, along with co-curator Kelly Bowen, engaged historians and translators to help her piece together these women's stories into a book called "Two Regimes: A Mother's Memoir of Wartime Survival."

Shaw and Bowen quickly realized the collection had enormous educational value and they coordinated the development of lesson plans to be used in the classroom alongside reproductions of the artworks. With support from the Foundation for Leon County Schools, state grant funds, and assistance from area teachers, the "Two Regimes" educational program has been used to teach fourth- through 12th-graders for the past two years.

Anne Hall designed the original content for middle school students and has worked on the curriculum for elementary and high school students as well. A veteran teacher, Hall taught social studies at Nims Middle School for 23 years. She retired four years ago but has returned to Nims through the "Two Regimes" project.

"You've got to learn from the past, and hopefully, those things aren't repeated," Hall said. "There are still holocausts. We don't always hear about them, but maybe 50 years from now, people will try to bring those atrocities to the forefront. As educators, the best we can do is teach those students we come into contact with and hopefully, it will spread if enough of us do that."

Adhering to one of the main tenets of historical inquiry, Hall emphasizes the importance of original materials and direct evidence. "These artworks are primary resources. Getting a first person narrative gives more meaning to it."

Hall challenges the students to closely observe the paintings and refrain from making inferences or attempting to analyze. "I want them to see that this is a painting of an actual person. This is a mother, she has a baby, she's carrying a child. This is a boy with his belongings on his back. I want them to be able to make some connection between the individual pieces of art before they start to interpret."

Sixth-grader Bradley Pitts and his classmates were moved by the harrowing story and by the paintings that so clearly illustrated the hardships. He said, "The artwork helped to explain how they felt and showed



PHOTOS BY AMANDA THOMPSON

Reproductions of Nadia Verbitsky's paintings are displayed in the classroom at Nims.



Nims students have questions for Anne Hall.

treated." She took this a step further and described how she aspires to be a positive influence on the lives of others when she grows up. "I really want to be a child protector. Say, for instance, someone has gotten abused and people might not realize what they've been through in the past. Many people keep that on their mind and they're hurting on the inside. I want to be able to step into the gap because that can really help that person."

Hall feels that the "Two Regimes" project assists students in constructing a historic context for the Holocaust and encourages them to compare what they learn to current events and situations in their own lives.

She believes these lessons are especially important for the students at Nims because "they know their neighborhood and for some, that's about all they're going to know. I want them to see that there is a world outside their little universe and I want them to be able to make a connection. The more exposure we can give them to other experiences and the experiences of other people, the more that empathy and compassion can become a part of their lives."

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others what they went through."

Al'zyia Francis agreed and added, "Artwork is a way to express yourself when you're sad instead of speaking because sometimes you can't speak about it. The paintings show how the family felt and how she felt at the time."

Taking stock of her own emotions and reflecting on what she had learned, Indigo Wilkerson said, "I got kind of mad because why would someone do that to people?" Thinking about the persecution and discrimination that millions continue to face because of their beliefs, she added, "Differences are good. No one would want to live in a world where everyone does the same things and has the same ideas. That would be kind of dull and boring."

For Latesha Cooper, all it comes down to the golden rule. "You should treat people the way you want to be

