

Booker Middle students share stories through artwork

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Among thousands of submitted works, 45 will be selected for display

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Deborah Herbert starts each of her advanced art classes with a question of the day and a discussion. Most of the time it's not even art related. Sometimes it's funny, sometimes it's serious. The point: her Booker Middle School students learn to listen to each other.

"We listen and talk, and still get all our art made," Herbert said. "I purposely make time so my students can share ideas. We talk about how art deals with life, and that means we can talk about life."

Herbert has worked hard to make her classroom a safe space to share thoughts in words and in art, which is a big reason her students pour personal stories into their work.

On Tuesday morning, her first period advanced art students quietly focus on finishing their entries for the 14th annual Embracing Our Differences exhibit. Thousands of art pieces will be submitted around the theme "enriching lives through diversity," though the program chooses just 45 pieces of art and quotations to display for the April 1-May 31 exhibit in Sarasota's Island Park.

Herbert's art classes have participated in the program since its 2004 inception. It's a highlight every year for them, she says, and allows them much creative freedom.

Most students used colored pencils, but a few opted for watercolor, paint, or mixed medium instead. The ideas their pieces represented spanned all manner of emotions, including support, fear, diversity, shame, pressure and creativity.

"How many of you were thinking about when you were bullied when you made your piece?" Herbert asked. "Or when you were in a situation that you didn't have a voice and your art was the voice for you?"

With no hesitation, half of her students raised their hands.

Marcus Cruz-Santiago, 13, focused heavily on his own experience with family and friends to create his piece. In it, minimalist sketches of people - simple circles and triangles representing their bodies - look at a leaning, drooping palm tree, held up by two strong beams labeled "SUPPORT."

"I went through situations I felt before and seeing how people supported me and helped me to where I am now," he said.

Herbert said that Cruz-Santiago identified with a strong embracing idea. "He needed other people to support him through a tough time, and instead of turning it negative, he made it a positive thing. He's sensitive and intuitive. A smart artist."

That sensitivity extended to other students as well. Twelve-year-old Sadie Smith, who has been drawing as long as she can remember, created a piece with fractured pieces of a face in different colors and frames that made a cohesive picture when viewed together.

"I think we're all the same," she said. "It doesn't matter what shape you are, color, race or religion. We're all people."

Emelina Gomez, 13, drew a girl crying, her colorful makeup streaming down her face.

"She's crying because she wants to be accepted," Gomez said. "I thought of my own personal experiences trying to accept my self-image, and how a lot of girls around the world struggle with that. In school I see people every day go through that. "

Herbert is proud that her students made their works personal.

"If the message is effectively communicated, it's an important piece," she said. "It doesn't matter if it's chosen for this exhibit. They're not just patronizing the ideas - these works were personal. The best ones always are."

Even though it's not about winning, Herbert said she's had at least one student's work chosen most years she's participated in Embracing Our Differences. Either way, once the exhibit goes up, she brings her class to see the art blown up huge and on display for all of Sarasota to see.

"It's life-changing for these kids because it's not just about the message, it's the message on that scale," she said. "That's really cool. This program has become something I can't imagine not having around. I think the less decisive we can be, the more we promote our individuality and uniqueness and allow for success and growth, the better. Allowing these kids to develop their own big ideas and have a bright future is what it's all about."