

Embracing Our Differences gives two Booker students the chance to shine



Booker High School juniors Kaley Rio, left, and Tatiana Gaskin show their art that will be displayed in the Embracing our Differences exhibit in Sarasota. [HERALD-TRIBUNE STAFF PHOTO / DAN WAGNER]

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Two Booker students will see their art in an international exhibit next weekend.

SARASOTA — For two Booker High School art students, getting selected for Embracing Our Differences' upcoming exhibit means the chance to show the world their unique voices.

Kaley Rio, 16, has been dreaming of this moment since she was in elementary school, when she remembers staring up, wide-eyed, at the posters and hoping to

create one of them someday. Tatiana Gaskin, 17, watched as a classroom assignment slowly became more meaningful to her as she discovered what she wanted to say.

“Throughout the process, it unearthed feelings about things and I became more passionate about it by the time I was done with it,” Gaskin said. “It started out as something I had to do and it was like, ‘Oh, what am I even going to do?’ I really put my feelings on paper.”

The nonprofit Embracing Our Differences organization touts its use of “the transformational power of art and education to celebrate and promote the diversity of the human family,” using a large-scale outdoor juried art exhibition and a series of educational initiatives, programs and resources designed for teachers and students.

Rio and Gaskin both have iconic and eclectic pieces that say two different things. Rio’s “Consumed” is an insightful look at consumerism, showing a young woman browsing a makeup store as the posters call out to her: “Be like me,” they say, “You could be me.” But she is not entirely them, because her hair reveals the teeth of a monster-like creature while her compact offers the same image.

Rio drew on her own childhood growing up with a mother who worked in special effects makeup. By the time she was 10, Rio began wearing makeup. She has since gone in the opposite direction, wearing no makeup as a junior in high school, a time when many young women choose to embrace makeup in their life, either as a way to emphasize their features or to obscure them.

“It got to a point where I’m not wearing any right now,” Rio said. “I realized that one, I don’t need it, and two, I feel comfortable without it and I should.”

Gaskin’s piece, “Let It Grow,” touches not so much on a specific personal experience, but on the divisive nature of any social or political climate. Her work shows a halved canvas, with one half depicting a hand picking out a flower from a barren ground while the other half is lush and bursting with color.

“When I was thinking about it, I was thinking about close-minded people, less so about the issue, but more so about the people that are close-minded that can’t accept things, who go out of their way to try and push things away,” Gaskin said.

Booker art teacher Jeffery Cornwell, also a practicing artist, said he encourages students to come up with their own ideas for their pieces, much like Gaskin and Rio.

“I give them very specific direction about how to think and approach an idea, but not directly what you should be talking about,” Cornwell said. “I want their own voice to be able to state something they might be able to see in the world.”

Embracing Our Differences is hosting its annual art exhibit for the 16th consecutive year. It will run from Jan. 19 through March 15 in Sarasota’s Bayfront Park. Since its early days, the exhibit has grown from 124 submissions the first year to almost 12,000 this year, said executive director Sarah Wertheimer. About 7,200 of those submissions were from local students, she said.

“That is really the most important part of what we do,” she said. “We believe that that number has continued to grow and grow so much because of our extended education we do throughout the year.”

After graduation, Rio hopes to go to Ringling College of Art and Design, calling it her “dream college.” But Gaskin is unsure what her future holds and whether that future includes a career in art.

Still, she admits that being involved with Embracing Our Differences has given her a boost.

“It’s a little nudge forward,” Gaskin said. “Maybe I have a chance out there.”