

Retreat puts emphasis on art teachers' creativity



Art teachers sketch scenes from Casablanca on Tuesday. [HERALD-TRIBUNE STAFF PHOTO / DAN WAGNER]

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Sarasota County teachers gain strategies during retreat at Ringling

SARASOTA — Oak Park School art teacher Patrice Kennedy brought along a photograph of her granddaughter Tuesday afternoon, from which she sketched a profile of the young girl in muted colors.

As one of 45 local art teachers chosen to participate in Embracing Our Differences' sixth annual Art Teacher Retreat this year at the Ringling Museum of Art, Kennedy said the experience opened her eyes to new strategies to bring to her students.

“I always learn about new perspectives for our students,” said Kennedy, who has attended the retreat in past years.

The two-day program brings together top Ringling Museum leaders, Sarasota County school district administrators and Ringling College of Art and Design professors. Previously, the retreat was hosted at Ringling College, but this year the Embracing Our Differences staff offered a change of venue: the Ringling’s Chao Lecture Hall in the airy Center of Asian Art galleries.

This has made all the difference, said Embracing Our Differences director Michael Shelton.

“I always think that we do a good job, but maybe we finally figured out how to do it,” he said. “The main purpose of this is to give teachers a chance away from the classroom to say, ‘Why did I want to be an artist or art educator?’ They can re-energize themselves with new passion.”

The program combined sessions on art creation and inspiration to how art changes the narrative and discussion in contemporary society. As part of the process, teachers created their own art, something many of them already do in their time as working artists. That is all part of the retreat’s goal, Shelton added.

“They can go back to their working mentality,” he said.

But ultimately it is the students who will experience the benefit, organizers hope. Although only 45 teachers attended, those teachers serve more than 12,000 students, Shelton said.

Horizons Academy art teacher Rolph Vassor said he felt grateful as he stooped over his sketch, attempting to render the image of a man on screen before him. As a teacher at an alternative school, Vassor said he struggles to encourage students to express themselves “properly” visually, but noted that the retreat has helped him to do so.

“It’s given me plenty of insight and motivation and different ways to attack the subject,” Vassor said.