

Inner-city art gets a boost with grant

Photos

Wilson students' photos to be displayed in various spots

ROBIN L. FLANIGAN

The more barren and lifeless the subject, the more attractive it is to Joseph C. Wilson Foundation Academy eighth-grader Alihana Hardy, a student in the Flower City Arts Center's Studio 678 Urban Youth Photography Project.

"I like dying grass and torn-down buildings, and I know that sounds weird," says the 13-year-old. "But photography can give things different words, you just have to give it time. Art can take something ugly and make it beautiful. You have to look deeper than the surface."

A grant recently awarded to Studio 678 gives Hardy and 29 sixth- through eighth-graders from Wilson the opportunity to have their work permanently placed in area human service agencies, public housing units, municipal buildings, clinics and other health care settings located in neighborhoods that don't typically display art. Many of them are the city neighborhoods where the students live.

"It's very empowering for them to be recognized as artists," says Sharon Turner, the art center's photography director. "This means we can reach out and have the work be where they are. It sends a good message in terms of valuing youth, valuing something they're working very hard to do, and also recognizing that art isn't just in galleries. Art can be anywhere."

The Fay Slover Fund at the Boston Foundation awarded the program \$12,500 for its project, titled "Art of the Community, By the Community, For the Community."

The sites and 30 images will be selected by the end of March; placements and art openings will occur throughout the spring. Students will be paid \$80 for each chosen image, which will have good composition and a strong, clear subject, according to Juliana Muniz, one of six lead teachers for Studio 678 and coordinator of the project.

"There has to be a certain level of complexity to the image, something that transcends the basic 'I made a picture,'" says Muniz, who is in the process of contacting places that might be interested in housing the youth's photographs. "These kids do reach that point with this program. It's so awesome to see them grow."

One person seriously interested in the project is Greg Soehner, president of East House, a nonprofit agency assisting people with mental illness and substance use disorders. East House has a new, 60-unit apartment building on Alexander Street that will house a mix of people who are served by the agency and who

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A photo by Joseph C. Wilson Foundation Academy student Alexandra McClung.

ALEXANDRA MCCLUNG

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qualify for affordable housing.

“We’re really looking at local flavor and creativity and positive energy and all those good things to add to the atmosphere, so it’s not just another apartment project,” says Soehner, who believes the youth’s work would be a notable addition to the building’s lobby and community room. “Our project is fairly unique. We are getting people out of hospitals and institutions and integrating them into a neighborhood, and to have prints by local kids and not just famous artists adds to the vibe that this project is part of the community.

“We also hope that by showcasing their competence, we can help support teens being creative,” he adds.

When the students learn that others want to offer that support, they become “more confident in themselves and their abilities and their

possibilities,” notes Muniz.

Just like Hardy, eighthgrader Emani Rogers, a second-year student in the program, observes that her eye tends to be drawn toward subjects not traditionally considered appealing.

“I like turning something that’s not really that interesting into something exciting that people want to look at on a day-today basis,” explains Rogers. “I usually go for angles and shadows, and texture. Like if I took a picture of a sidewalk, I have all these ideas that are like poems in my head. I think about how it was made, the holes or the cracks, the lines in the dirt. When I zoom in, it’s really cool. And if I see ants, that’s really cool, too.”

Asked how she would feel if one or more of her images wound up hanging in the community, she adds: “I’d feel like I might be able to do something with my life; that maybe what I do is appreciated.”

Robin L. Flanigan is a Rochester-area freelance writer.



AAMEANAH KING

Aameanah King’s photography is part of the urban project.

AAMEANAH KING

“Photography can give things different words, you just have to give it time.”

ALIHANA HARDY

JOSEPH C. WILSON FOUNDATION ACADEMY STUDENT

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