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Souderton school district students create 'Under the Sea' mural for Juvenile Court

Deck the halls Souderton school district students create 'Under the Sea' mural for Juvenile Court

By M. English, 21st Century Media Services

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Bread & Puppet Theater's "Why Cheap Art? Manifesto" declares in part:

"Art soothes pain!

"Art wakes up sleepers!

"Art fights against war & stupidity!

"Art sings hallelujah!

"Art is for kitchens!

"Art is like good bread...green trees...white clouds in blue sky!"

The new "Under the Sea" mural students from Souderton Area School District's West Broad Street Elementary School created for the waiting room at Montgomery County Juvenile Court exudes the same upbeat spirit Bread & Puppet's Glover, Vt.-based artists proclaim in their Manifesto.

The painting – all calm blue water and insouciant marine life – was commissioned by Montgomery Bar Association's Family Law Section. The three-by-four-foot canvas was dedicated during a Nov. 30 ceremony at Montgomery County Courthouse and installed at Juvenile Court on Port Indian Road in West Norriton last week.

"What a great day for the children and their families," WBSSES Principal Marianne Boyd observes. "What a wonderful tribute for West Broad Street Elementary. We are so grateful for this opportunity, for the guidance of (WBSSES art teacher Kim Minnucci) and for the talent and hard work of our students."

She gets no argument from Minnucci, point person for the project, or Melissa Boyd (no relation), the Norristown attorney who spearheaded it last spring.

The latter traces her inspiration to a similar undertaking organized roughly a decade ago by now Judge-elect Daniel J. Clifford. Back then, Clifford served as chair of the Bar Association's Family Law Section – a post she currently holds.

"I've always remembered it was such a fabulous thing that Dan did during his year (as chair), so I couldn't resist the urge to take something like this on during my year," she says.

Boyd, also active with the county's Montgomery Child Advocacy Project, reasoned that adding a colorful visual to the "stark white" space in the Juvenile Court waiting room would make it less forbidding.

"I'm an attorney, yes, but I'm a mom first and foremost, and I liked the idea of doing something to make that area more child-friendly," she says. "My three children attend West Broad Street Elementary School, so I pitched the idea to our principal, and she was very enthusiastic and supportive. Two of my children were among the students selected to work on the mural, and it turned out to be a wonderful experience...which, in addition to the obvious, taught the kids a lot about service and giving back to the community.

"Another great lesson...the whole idea of kids doing something for kids, all of which ties in with the positive behavior program at West Broad Street Elementary School."

According to Minnucci, the toughest part of the project was selecting the 14 students who ultimately created the mural.

"We have 500 boys and girls at West Broad, and they're all great artists," she says. "So I narrowed it down to kids with excellent artistic skills who were able to work on the project after school and – this was key – who could work well with others as a group. The problem was, I wanted to pick everyone. I wish I could have chosen more."

That said, the team that completed the mural – first-graders Ama Otu-Adum and Isaac Richner; second-graders Morgan Harp, Julia Sipes and Brendan Boyd; third-graders Lauren Park and Christian Gresko; fourth-graders Kyla Shaw, Addison Iannetta and Jacob Chow; and fifth-graders Grace Boyd, Nathaniel Brown, Krieg Pierce and Laura Loux – "couldn't have done a better job," Minnucci continues.

"We explained that we wanted to do something that would make Juvenile Court a happier place for the kids who had to be there, and our kids really got into the idea of doing that," she says. "The first day we got together, we talked about what we wanted to (achieve)...and about the sort of pictures and ideas that would accomplish that. I literally didn't do any of the painting. I gave the kids a little basic direction, and we used a big white board I have to tweak some of their practice drawings before they began painting the actual canvas. They worked together beautifully. They were all very accepting of what everyone was doing, and the older kids couldn't have been nicer to the younger ones."

A Souderton educator for the past 13 years, Minnucci calls the reception her students received at Montgomery County Courthouse "the highlight of my teaching career."

"The kids were so excited," she says. "The whole thing was impressive...the way the judge and different officials spoke to them, just being in the courthouse. There were parents and grandparents there, too, so that made it even more exciting for them. It was wonderful...watching the kids when they stood up and recited our school's positive behavior pledge, having lunch at the Bar Association. It was just a great day, and everyone involved made it very special."

Boyd, who co-chairs the bar association's annual Courting Art program with Judge Carolyn Carluccio, expected nothing less.

"The level of support and encouragement from the bench was wonderful, but that's not anything new," she says. "We just had our Family Law holiday party, and tons of judges came out for that. The relationship between the Bar and the Bench in the county is pretty incredible on an ongoing basis.

“But, all of that aside, the kids’ painting is so happy and wonderful, and it will, literally, be the first thing people see when they walk into the waiting room at Juvenile Court. Will there be more? That would be my hope.”

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