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On race relations, they get the picture



Joshua Payne, an 11-year-old sixth grader at View Park Preparatory Middle School, looks over the exhibit backed by the Inner City Education Foundation Public Schools.

BY LEILONI DE GRUY, Staff Writer 05.JUN.08

Students across L.A. create artwork intended to help people of different races find common ground.

After a collaboration with faculty from the L.A.-based Inner City Education Foundation Public Schools, African-American and Latino students from 10 different schools throughout the county are, with their art, breaking color barriers.

The second annual Colors for Unity Juried Art Exhibition, hosted by ICEF as well as the Norm Maxwell Gallery took place recently showcasing the work of students from eight ICEF charter schools and two Los Angeles Unified School District schools, Garfield and Manual Arts high schools.

“We [ICEF and LAUSD] are located in predominately urban areas where our students have to interact with Latinos and [where] their classmates are Latino,” said Amarpal Khanna, director of the visual arts program at ICEF Public Schools “We wanted them to understand that we have a common history that goes way back.”

Both cultures are similar in so many different ways, said Khanna.

“There are African settlements in Mexico, we have similar musical heritage, political heritage [and] there are a lot of common struggles that both groups have gone through,” he said. “So there’s really no reason to be at each other’s throats. ... At the end of the day we are all going through the same things.”

Providing a theme for which to base the project on was key but more so was the understanding behind why both ethnic groups should coexist in peace.

In order to carry out that goal, ICEF Public Schools’ assistant director Ismael Soto said, “Our teachers actually had brainstorming sessions with our students in class, discussing unity, what that means to them [and] what they see the other culture has done as a benefit ... after that, the ideas and the creation began soaring.”

Cesar Cortez, a senior from Garfield High School, won first place for his depiction of unity. The aspiring graphic designer digitally manifested his work through Photoshop.

The two-week project required him to take “various pieces from the Internet and put [them] all together.

“I printed out the world and then I split it in half and in the middle I put a lot of flags ... the hands wrap around the world,” he said, and with it came a powerful statement. “United in Picture, Can We in Life?”

After being presented with the topic by an ICEF representative who approached his art class, the idea to unite the various cultures, not just African-Americans and Latinos, had come to mind.

“I live in East Los Angeles and there’s a lot of gang violence and racial problems around and I think we should start in our own community, unite there first, then spread the word.” Cortez said.

His artwork, he said, was his way of expressing that.

Joshua Payne, a sixth grader from View Park Preparatory Middle School, has always had great relations with other races, particularly Latinos, according to his mother, Brenda Thompson, and father, Edgar Payne. He found inspiration in a particular event.

"I went up north in California and I had a barbecue with my family and my neighbors were Latino and we are all friends and that's what gave me the idea for my project," said the 11 year old, who used bright colors to draw sombreros, food and African-American and Latinos dancing. "I have a lot of Latino friends so it means a lot to me."

Audrey Cotright, an art teacher for ICEF, said, "If you look at the artwork[s] they are finding ways to show how Blacks and Latinos come together, how they have a lot of things in common and hopefully through art they can pick up a paint brush and not something else," she said referring to weapons. "Many of these kids have experienced gang violence or have been somewhat attached to it via the neighborhood, so for the most part they are aware, they are almost all aware in high school but in middle school they're getting the concept because there is a question of what colors to wear in certain neighborhoods so it has a deep impact and this way they're able to vent their feelings in a positive way."

The artworks, presented by art classes in the sixth through 12th, were viewed by an independent panel of judges whose professions are in the field of art.

The winners were determined based on originality, quality and how well their piece kept with the theme and were separated by middle and high school, then by category, such as fine arts, paints, pastels and digital media.

Prizes are a \$100 to \$300 gift certificate from Utrecht In all, Khanna expressed that he hopes the youth who participated in the Colors for Unity exhibit will have gained more in the long run.

"For one," Khanna said, "they are able to see that it's a viable career, especially in today's informational technology-oriented economy, they can take their creative ideas, they can take the technology that's off the shelf now and make movies and tell stories about their community, tell stories about their lives and really it's given them a broader sense of the world around [them]."

- Photo by Gary McCarthy