

Looking up in lockdown

Art class provides youths at center with creative, constructive outlet

January 20, 2006

By Amy Maestas | Special to the Herald

With an art book cracked open to a famous Georgia O'Keeffe painting, a 17-year-old boy with a troubled life studied it intently. To most art appreciators, O'Keeffe's work is a familiar sight. But for this young man, learning about her art is a rare gem.



A student works on designs at the Robert E. DeNier Youth Services Center on Friday.

His eyes widened upon learning of her regional roots. "She lived in New Mexico? Can you really go see her house where she lived?" he asked enthusiastically.

Such a reaction is uncommon among teens, especially among those whose run-ins with the law, failure at school and strained family lives places them outside

the purview of art - and many other sectors of society. But with Durango School District 9-R's art program at the Robert DeNier Youth Services Center, the residents there are finding that structure and creative venting comes in more ways than acting out against the law.

DeNier, located in Bodo Industrial Park, is a lockdown facility that houses juvenile offenders. It is owned by the state and is part of the state's juvenile-corrections program. It houses mostly children from Southwest Colorado. Rite of Passage, a private Nevada-based company, runs the center.

Each week, two local artists, who split time during the year-round program lead the kids in art class. Debra Greenblatt began the teaching stint just more than a year ago, signing on with the school district's new program. Greenblatt said she jumped at the opportunity as her passion for art began turning from the private to the public. Before teaching at DeNier, Greenblatt spearheaded the mural painting on the wall of the highway 550/160 underpass at Santa Rita Park, which was done by youth from DeNier. That project charged her, she said.

"It's pretty interesting to learn about what turns these kids on," she added.

After beginning work at DeNier, Greenblatt led the kids in another public project: Last spring, they created one of the pumas that made up the San Juan Mountains Association art project. Their puma, which stands at Alpine Bank, is covered with mirrored tiles in the shapes of Southwestern petroglyphs.

The challenge of teaching at DeNier extends beyond the typical ennui or low self-confidence so many teens experience. Incarcerated kids have even bigger walls for the artists to break down. Often, Greenblatt said, the kids have difficulty trusting adults, especially those with authority who are trying to add structure and purpose in their lives.

"My role is to open their eyes to all sorts of visual expression," she said. "And in that process it's about trying to take their destructive behavior and channel it into something artistic."

Beyond righting these kids' life tracks, learning art helps them learn patience, goal-setting and self-discipline.

Jules Masterjohn, who teaches during the three winter months Greenblatt takes off to be a ski instructor at Durango Mountain Resort, said the art is intertwined with life and its plentiful lessons. She likens working with the kids to jazz music.

"So much of it is improvisation," she said.

An 11-year-old resident agreed.

"Art lets your mind be free. I like it because there is no right or wrong way to do it," he said.

Part of the trick, both artists said, is working in the boundaries at the center. They must choose their art tools wisely, keeping certain objects and materials from the kids lest they harm themselves or others. The restrictions add an element of improvisation too.

In spite of the tool limits, Greenblatt and Masterjohn said it pushes their own art into different realms. Greenblatt explained that leading the kids in public art projects has made her create individual art that is available to a broader audience.

She also enjoys exposing young people to art when they otherwise might not get such a chance. Greenblatt said that in the process, she has found greater appreciation of her exposure to art while growing up near New York City.

Masterjohn says working with the kids goes beyond the tangible - a final piece of art that can be viewed and touched by many. It also strikes an emotional nerve, knowing how much impact success and ingenuity has on the incarcerated youth.

"It's not the art part but the heart part," Masterjohn concluded.

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