

The Learning Curve

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Your weekly guide to students, schools, teachers and triumphs in Bibb County's Public Schools

Student art show premieres at Macon Little Theater



Art teacher Eric Cooper works with his students to finish up their projects.

"It's great to keep this thing going," says Vineville Academy Art Teacher Eric Cooper of his students' artwork being displayed at the Macon Little Theater. Last year, he was asked to put together a display for them, and he jumped at the opportunity, creating a display of masks the students had made.

When he was contacted this year to create a display to go along with the play *Traditions*, his students were in the middle of several projects, giving him a wide array of work to choose from. "It was perfect timing," he says. "The title is *Explosion of Color*, and the name definitely fits."

With the bulk of the material coming from 1st and 5th graders, Cooper tried to fit as much as possible on the wall. From eye level up, there's almost no space not covered with art. He brought more than 150 pieces with him and was able to fit almost 100 on the walls. After its showing there, it was all moved to the Board of Education where every piece will be displayed for several weeks.

"It's just perfect to have children's artwork displayed [at the Theater and Board of Education]," he says, grinning.

Every grade is represented in the display, but the majority came from 1st and 5th graders' projects. The 1st graders were studying Henri Matisse and his use of bold, expressionistic color, and the 5th graders were studying abstraction. They would take a particular masterpiece "and compose and rearrange it in their own unique way."

Cooper would like to continue this tradition and partnership with the Macon Little Theater because it gives his students one more outlet to showcase their work to the community. On average, they host 3-4 shows a year at the school and in various places around the city.

Innovative class has students excited about writing

"I've been so blessed to have the most rockingest job in the world," laughs Vineville Academy Creative Expressions teacher Victoria Wright. "All the kids here are geniuses. I can convince them poetry is cool."

Before the kids even walk into the class - led by Wright to a carpet in the middle of the room where they all sit in a circle with their writing folders and clipboard before them - you look forward to seeing what these kids can do. Begun this year by Principal Paulette Winters, Creative Expressions was formed as another way to encourage the students' creativity when it comes to writing.

"I thought of Creative Expressions because I wanted Wright to create and foster a climate where children were free to express themselves through their writing, not only in the written word but orally and visually," Winters says. "The most exciting part is to see children who are so shy and really have not found their niche yet spend hours and hours writing and bearing their souls."

"I will invite you in the classroom when you're in a straight line," she tells a class of fourth graders who are already in a straight line and not talking. They just look eager to be inside and seated on the carpet. Other than the carpet, there is no place to sit except at the computers around the room, already on with a word processing program open. Wright's desk is covered in papers and student



Students in Creative Expressions discussing literary techniques and what they want to write that day.

work; even the chair has something on it. As the class continues, it's easy to see why: she's all over the class working with the students; there's no time to sit down.

Each student gets their "Writer's Notebook," a collection of everything they're working on, from poetry to short stories to class assignments. "I tell them that's their personal space to write whatever they want. I promised them no one would look in them, not even me."

Having that safe place, she explains, is a big push for them to open up and write whatever they're thinking, without the fear of someone

telling them it's wrong. "As kids they have no concept of audience, and they're just so honest. Their creativity is immediate; it's spontaneous."

As another class files in - this time of shyly giggling 1st graders - the thought crosses your mind of how you inspire the smaller children to write and what they will write about. Without missing a beat in the age difference, she starts off "what are some words we could write on a card that would make people happy?"

Hands are thrown into the air; it's the Holiday Season, and these kids are eager to start making their cards. Asked who he will be writing to, one student answers "Mrs. Winters." As they are each assigned to a computer to putting their words into sentences - each is now writing to Winters - Wright tells them "I can't wait to hear your words."

Finishing up and printing it off, they rush to Wright, eager to show off what they've done.

They're even showing it to the other kids in the class. "That is so cute," she tells them "Your sentences make me real happy!"

One student pipes up with a hopeful look in his eyes. "Ms. Wright, can I sit in the Special Chair and read?" At the end of her classes, she has the children sit in a chair that is only used for reading aloud what they've written. "Kids, someone's about to share their words, which are little slivers of their soul," Wright tells them as they gather back in the middle of the room. "And remember, no one talks when someone's reading." After the applause dies down after each reading, the student who read calls on another to see what they thought of the piece.

There are examples of student writing all over the classroom walls; there are folders full of works in progress; the hallway outside is covered with student work and quotes from literary masters; each month, Wright chooses a Writer of the Month, earning them their own display of what they've done.

According to Wright, the students have really taken to writing and seem to enjoy it immensely. She points out one shy, quiet-spoken 5th grader who comes in first thing every morning to read a new poem to Wright. One student sent a poem to Georgia's Poet Laureate David Bottoms, who wrote back a personal letter containing a critique and encouragement to keep writing. "He treated her like a peer, like a fellow writer," Wright points out.

It's not just the students who are inspired to write something every day - throughout all her classes and planning period, students keep stopping by randomly to show off what they had just written - Wright says her own writing has improved. "They're incredible; every day they inspire me. It's good for them to see me as a writer, that it's what I do for fun."

Westside High's Humanities and Arts program hosts premiere art show

"Tonight's event is the Harts premiere event," says Westside High School's Small Learning Community Coordinator Kaye Burch as she points out the wide array of exhibits and activities going on.

"This whole thing is about integrating the arts in the school and community," explains Fiber Arts teacher Kelly Shadwell.

In their 10th grade year, Westside students choose a focus for their next three years, one of which can be Humanities and the Arts, aptly titled Harts. Each semester, they will have an event like this one showcasing student work. This one, being the first ever showing, incorporated so much more than just student artwork. "It just grew," Burch says, chuckling in wonderment.

During an Educator's Social hosted by the Harriet Tubman African American Museum, Westside teachers found out one of the art exhibits was about to be moved to storage, but they wanted to give their students a chance to learn from it.

The exhibit, entitled *Matte Masse* ("What I Hear I Keep"), focuses on the African American plight through historical leaders like Zora Neal Hurston, Harriet Tubman, Madam CJ Walker, Nat Love, Lena Horne, Richard Wright, Maya Angelou, Frederick Douglass, and many others. "How can we incorporate this into our lesson plans?" Pauly Sheehan, Westside Art Department Head, wanted to know.

So the exhibit was brought to the school, and teachers in Harts are working with the Museum on creating lesson plans centered on it. From here, Muhammed hopes other schools will show an interest in hosting the exhibit, using the lesson plans created by the teachers. "This school may have started something," she says.

"The whole process is to bring this to our students and remind them from whence they come," says Assistant Principal Pat Yarbrough.

"I believe highly in museum education and traveling exhibits. Museum displays in schools are truly a great education," praises Shadwell of the effort. "It's a real-world connection like no other."

"What else can we do?" Sheehan asked the other art teachers, and they decided to combine the opening of the Museum's exhibit with the school's semester art show. On one table were student's works with the Memory Book Project, where they each made a children's book. Students wrote the stories and bound them themselves, and from here, they will be sent to needy children in Uganda.



Students, parents, and faculty admiring the books made by students for children in Uganda.

Students also worked with the Memory Portrait Project, where they received a photo of a child, then painted a portrait to be sent to the child. "Even if the books and portraits don't last a lifetime," says Sheehan, "the memory of receiving them will."

Students were even collecting money for Heifer International, which goes towards buying needy families in poor countries a cow or goat, providing them a renewable source of food and other products.

Recently, a Westside teacher was called to duty and is now serving in Iraq, and he wrote to the school of a project they could be involved in to support the troops. Two years ago, they sent their first batch of sheets painted with uplifting memories from home to be hung in the hospitals. "They wanted lots of color because the walls are so drab and dreary," says Sheehan. They painted a whole new set this year, and they will be shipped overseas in January.

"Doesn't this blow your mind?" asks Yarbrough, referring to the kindness and desire to help other people shown by her students. "We're so very proud of them."