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COMMUNITY THROUGH ART AND DESIGN

Connecting the Campus with the Wider Community Benefits Everyone

**By Janden Richards
and Wanda Sullivan**



Drawing, ink on paper, by Dayna Shonk

Spring Hill College's Department of Fine and Performing Arts engages art and design students in experiential learning classes and projects with community partners. These classes enrich students' academic achievement and personal growth, and they build relationships in the community. We call this "Community through Art and Design."

In 2009 the Alabama Governor's Office contacted the art department and asked if students could provide artwork for a publication on homelessness in Alabama. The first of three Portrait Projects began with the Homeless Project. Students in drawing, painting, and printmaking were required to spend time at a multi-service facility for the homeless population in Mobile. Their final assignment was to do a formal portrait of one or more of the clients they met. Besides learning formal technical skills, the students began to see homeless people not as faceless statistics but as people with individual stories.

The next school year, we did the Portrait Project at the Boys and Girls Club. Students spent time with a child throughout the semester and then did their portrait for the final. They gave the portraits to the kids. Poor, minority kids are eager to feel special, and they were absolutely thrilled with their portraits. The portraits themselves were outstanding. The students poured their hearts into the portraits, because they cared about these kids, they were invested.

For the past two years, advanced painting students have painted murals in schools; hence the Mural Project was born. Last year they painted at Little Tree pre-school for autistic and non-autistic children, and this year they did a mural in the library at Palmer Pillans Middle School. They have developed a reputation for their work.

Graphic design students work with several organizations whose primary purpose is the common good. Developing promotional materials for these organizations helps heighten students' sense of civic responsibility.

Students are exposed to a broad range of cultural experiences, some of which are outside their comfort zone. The projects build empathy, helping stu-

dents to identify others' needs. They are challenged beyond theoretical understanding of design principles and technical skills learned in regular classroom assignments. Exposing our design students to a broader range of cultural experiences helps them question not only how a design looks but also what it communicates, what it means.

Evaluation of the work includes written and oral reflection as a way to enhance learning.

One student, Tyler Hartlage, had this to say as he presented his brochure to our community partner: "St. Mary's Home offers hope to abused children through love, trust and acceptance. My concept for the brochure reflects St. Mary's mission, it is straightforward and positive but difficult to carry out."

Another reflection by student Rachael Cochran shows the impact of the program: "Every week I looked forward to Friday afternoon when I would go spend a few hours with a woman who became a part of my family at Little Sisters of the Poor. Her name was Gerdiest. Gerdiest and I became fast friends and some afternoons it was next to impossible to pry me off of her floral couch. She always had some fantastic story to tell me.

"She became such a big part of my family that when I started seriously dating my now boyfriend she made me bring him to meet her just to make sure he passed all of her tests. He did, and every week after she asked me when I was going to bring him back. Volunteering at Little Sisters of the Poor gave me such an incredible opportunity to meet someone who opened up my eyes to so many wonderful things."

Artists and designers need curiosity and an awareness of disciplines beyond art and design to succeed in their professions. In "Community Through Art and Design," students have opportunities to research social and environmental issues, interact with our partner organizations, and make presentations of their work. ■

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