EDUCATION

Staten Island students show their unity through art

Joseph Ostapiuk *jostapiuk@siadvance.com*

The artists who collaborated to create the 'unity' mural. Below, students' works of art.
Joseph Ostapiuk/Staten Island Advance photos

Unveiled in large, bright letters, the word "unity" stretched across the back of one of the bleachers at Port Richmond High School.

Ten Port Richmond High School students, Staten Island Arts and the Wagner College Port Richmond Leadership Academy took to working on the space, previously a blank red canvas, to create a mural alongside previous pieces created by Staten Island artists.

At the start of the project, Deputy Director of Staten Island Arts Monica Valenzuela said: "We were looking for a bold word" to be the focal point of the project.

"Unity really stuck out, and we think that it really speaks to current events, but is also timeless," she added.

The partnership then worked with Teaching Artist Robert Geronimo, and Street Artist Kevin Mahoney, to teach the students the basics of art and design.

For Geronimo, one of the most enthralling parts of working on the project was that the students, "were all willing to learn."

"For many of them, art is not their main interest, but they all had something really unique to say in their pieces," he said.

The students' profound creativity shone through the piece, and Geronimo said he believes that their work "promotes creativity, imagination and also shows collaboration" because of the students work together to create the beautiful mural.

"Art is a universal language, so it speaks on multiple levels, and when it's a big collaborative effort, there's something even more powerful about that," he said.

Arlette Cepeda, director for the center for leadership and community engagement at Wagner College, oversees the Port Richmond Partnership Leadership Academy, a collaboration with Staten Island Arts, to help students receive the skills necessary for college readiness.

Cepeda said the goal of the program is for the students to "go to any college; the one that fills their needs and passions and possibilities."

However, the program's goals speak to students' needs outside of the classroom as well. "The idea is also that they feel the need and the desire to give back to the community, so that they become agents of change, and we somehow break the cycle of poverty and lack of resources because they become the leaders

of tomorrow," Cepeda said.

Timofej Jermolaev, a recent Port Richmond High School graduate and one of the project's artists, said the program helped in "expressing my creative side."

In regard to the piece's importance to Port Richmond, he added, "A community, by definition, is just a unity of people, so this is an integral part of community."

Port Richmond High School junior Chris Sweeney, another artist who worked on the piece, said the mural was the last thing he expected to do in the program, but that it was an "awesome" experience.

He said he hopes people recognize that, "there's many different people that come to Port Richmond, different ethnicities, religions, and it's a very diverse community."

Valenzuela concluded by saying: "Sometimes there were things that we weren't expecting and those were the happy accidents that ended up being really beautiful. And, it was in this spirit that the mosaic of the student's ideas, backgrounds and perspectives emerged to create this unique mural centered on working together to achieve something positive."

To see more of the Staten Island Public Art Project, visit http://www.publicart.nyc for details.