

Art shows help kids gain confidence, express feelings

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For Raina McFarland, "Art is important ... because it is more than just a pastime. Art is an emotional release to me. It's the one thing that I can throw my heart into and never worry about being judged."

McFarland, a 17-year-old senior at Clear Creek Amana High School, was one of 35 artists who participated in solo or collaborative shows this year at the United Action for Youth Gallery at 355 Iowa Ave. in Iowa City.

UAY artist in residence Mickey Hampton sees a value in offering art beyond a display of something pretty.

"Art is not just for kids who want to go on to art school. ... Art is a way for kids to gain confidence in their ability to make a mark, to make a difference, to make an impression. For many kids, art is a way to be heard," Hampton said.

Russell Phelps, 16, a senior at Tate High School, said, "Art to me is a gateway to other stuff. I had so many built-up problems, and it allowed me to get away from stuff." His solo show of drawings and sculpture was at the UAY Gallery in March.

Diane Tonkyn is a licensed marriage and family therapist and board-certified art therapist at UAY. Tonkyn uses visual art and poetry to help her clients talk about topics that are hard to verbalize. She describes her work by saying, "Art therapy facilitates healing and promotes growth and development. It helps youth resolve issues that are sometimes too painful for words. The imagery is a bridge that leads to positive change."

UAY art shows are part of Iowa City Gallery Walks. Hampton mentors the artists through the steps of matting and displaying their work.

"It's amazing to watch a young person go through the process of hanging their first art show. They start out being really self-conscious and shy about sharing their artwork. Afterwards, you can see that not only do they take themselves more seriously as artists, but the people around them -- parents, friends, teachers -- take them more seriously as well."

McFarland agrees that "having UAY host a show for me was amazing. I felt so accomplished when it was over. So many important people in my life were able to come see my work, see what I do, and they then were able to understand why I do it."

The UAY arts program also offers a continuum of experiences for the advanced and the beginning artist.

Malik Campbell, 11, is a sixth-grader at Grant Wood Elementary who participates in a weekly art club facilitated by UAY.

"I like art club because I get to make things that I've never made before, like a pillow," Malik said.

Malik thinks he will continue with art.

"When I was little, I wanted to paint the walls of my room and my mother said, 'Be an artist when you grow up.' Art is important to me because since I was little, I always liked to draw. I used to hang pictures on my wall and I want to become an artist when I grow up."

Art is a cornerstone of the UAY Youth Center.

"At UAY we make a big deal out of creating a positive environment that values the creative side of every young person. Art is such an important way for kids to explore their world. When young people are encouraged to express themselves it's like saying, 'We care what you have to say.' Everyone wants to be heard, and art can make a powerful statement that is often more poignant than words," Hampton said.



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