

‘Kind Of Magical’

Kids Channel Inner Artists With Help From HHS Seniors

By ELLIE POTTER Daily News-Record

HARRISONBURG — Seven Harrisonburg High School seniors found their home in the Fine Arts Academy.

Now, they’re spending part of their final semester bringing art to younger students, potentially helping them discover their “home.”

For the senior capstone course in the academy, the HHS students designed workshops to introduce fine arts to elementary school students.

High school students must audition before being accepted into the academy. Those accepted must take classes focusing on visual art, movement, drama, music or creative writing.

On Thursday, the seniors worked with about 40 second-graders at Smithland Elementary School, incorporating elements of music, theater, dance and visual arts into their presentation.

Before they graduate, the students will have visited a grade level at each elementary school.

Naomi Gelberg-Hagmaier, 18, daughter of Jill Hagmaier and Michael Gelberg, said the concept that “home isn’t just where you live; it’s what you love” has made an impression on the children.

“Home is what you make it,” she said. “For us, art’s the home.”

The students began their lesson with a skit by Joshua Lucas, 17, son of Stephen Lucas and Abigail Schweber. Afterward, he asked the students to act like various animals or demonstrate different emotions, introducing them to drama.

The arts helped him through middle school especially, he said, when he was bullied for dancing and acting.

“But I still had something in my life that I could forget about all of that for, and so it made life so much easier,” he said. “It meant that there was always a constant in my life throughout all these years.”

The seniors also worked with the children on drawings, asking them to sketch what home means to them on a puzzle piece. Some drew houses or their school, while others drew family members, flowers, boats on the water, and one wrote “Colorado.”

The puzzle pieces will eventually form a mural as part of the seniors’ final project, but they are still hashing out the details.

Jane Wyatt, 17, daughter of Carey and Bill Wyatt, said the group spent a long time brainstorming ideas for their final project. The one thing they agreed on was that the academy was their “niche” in high school.

She and several of her classmates wished they had more school art options before their freshman year, she said, and so they wanted to share the arts with those who may not have access to classes or lessons outside of school.

Karina Vazquez-Murillo, 18, daughter of Aureliano and Ortencia Vazquez, said her family was unable to afford dance classes growing up.

Now, she studies it regularly.

“When they brought dance into HHS,” she said, “that was really a huge opportunity for me to actually expand my knowledge.”

The Smithland students appreciated their visit and art lessons.

Wesley Fulford, 7, son of Tyler and Elizabeth Fulford, said he enjoyed playing games and learning from the high school students “because you get to learn new stuff you might not know.”

J.R. Snow, director of the academy, said the project was a “win-win” for both groups of students. He’s hopeful that the older students inspire the younger ones, and the seniors take time to reflect on all that they’ve learned the last four years.

After the seniors complete the workshops, Snow said, they will discuss “how they think they left something a little bit bigger than themselves in the minds and the hearts of those elementary school students.”

Before the event, Amber Corrison, the academy’s dance teacher, glanced over at all seven laughing around a cafeteria table. Alice Perrine, Rose Copeland and Bradley Kirkdorffer round out the senior fine arts team.

The students are all different with various artistic interests, she said, so it benefits them to work together.

“It helps us grow as people,” Corrison said. “We learn a lot from each other. I don’t think this group would have naturally all been friends and laughing around a table — and that’s kind of magical.”

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