

Art workshops helping bridge generation gap

Area artists challenge STEP program students to discover their creative side

By Stephanie Hounsell
CANADIAN CHAMPION STAFF

The so-called "generation gap" can seem unbearably wide, especially to teens who don't necessarily fit the mould.

But a group of artists is helping to bridge that gap through a series of creative workshops it's giving to students at a local alternative education school — and the teens couldn't be more grateful.

"Having adults treat you normal — as teens — and not stereotype you (is refreshing)," said 17-year-old Laynee Belzil, a student at the Secondary Teen Education Program (STEP), part of Gary Allan High School.

But that's not the only reason she likes the art sessions.

"It's lots of fun sitting around and getting your hands dirty," she laughed, adding it takes her back to her childhood.

Laynee is just one of the students at STEP — which meets at the back of Grace Anglican Church on Main Street — who has taken part in a number of the art workshops, which are voluntarily put on by artists of the Tuesday Painters, a member of the Fine Arts Society of Milton (FASM).

The workshops have introduced the students, who range in age from 16 to 19, to the world of collagraphy, a type of printmaking.

Most recently, students made Mother's Day cards using the technique, and another workshop is set for Thursday, May 14.

Since the STEP program doesn't have art classes as part of its curriculum, the time and effort donated by the artists is giving the students an opportunity they wouldn't otherwise have to be creative, said STEP teacher Betty Jean Hutton.

She said it's heartwarming to observe how the artists have taken to the students and vice versa.

"It's a great sight to see the students of Gary Allan mingle with the older generation," Hutton said. "I think greater understanding and tolerance was developed between the generations as a result of the workshop(s)."

Students at the half-day STEP program are there because of a variety of challenges, Hutton said. Some have ADD or work at a slower pace than a "regular" high school allows for, while others have life circumstances that prevent them from attending school full time, such as financially-necessary jobs.

"They all come from regular high schools where for whatever reason they didn't fit in so maybe their experience with adults is not great," Hutton said, adding that's what makes this experience an important one.

Learning something new and doing it well raises students' self esteem and simply makes them feel good, she said.

To make their collagraphs, the students build up a collage on a piece of cardboard with a variety of materials. They then cover the collage with ink via a roller and make a print, transferring the image of the collage onto a piece of paper.



ARTISTS AT WORK: Joan Hatten leads an arts workshop at Grace Anglican Church as part of the STEP program.

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Laynee said she considers herself a creative person and used to enjoy drama in middle school. She said she misses having a chance to dabble in art, and is grateful for this opportunity to do just that.

"It's giving me the chance to express myself and to let everything else (worries) just fade away because I'm focusing on art and being creative."

Of course, it's not just the students who benefit from the classes. It's also the artists themselves.

Joan Hatten, one of the Tuesday

Painters who heads the workshops, said it's been very rewarding.

"It gives them something to be proud of — something different from their day-to-day routine," she said.

Hatten admits she was a bit hesitant at first, not knowing if the students would be particularly interested in what the Tuesday Painters — who meet in the basement of Grace Anglican Church — would have to say.

She needn't have worried. Their response was overwhelming.

When the afternoon STEP students recently heard the morning students were making the cards, one of them reportedly said: "Hey, we have mothers too," Hatten said chuckling.

She added Hutton told her the students didn't want their masterpieces put up on the classroom walls because they wanted to take them home.

"It's a feel-good thing," she said.

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