

Youths express themselves in mural



Photo by Ed Cohen

From left standing: Shawn A. Pafumi, Shareef T. Ibrahim, artist Julissa L. Rodriguez and Ricky L. Brown. Kneeling, Julie Lichtenberg, artistic director for The Performance Project, and Tony Lugo. The young men all helped paint the mural behind them at the Center for Human Development's Community Adolescent Reentry Services program in Springfield.

By Staasi Heropoulos

It's often difficult for young people to be heard above the din of adult dialogue. But a new mural in Springfield is allowing young people to express themselves, and adults are paying attention.

"I was able to get my voice heard through the mural. I talked about everyday life as a young person in Springfield," said Shareef T. Ibrahim, 18.

Ibrahim watched proudly and read a poem aloud as an 8- by 12-foot mural he helped create was unveiled recently at the offices of the Center for Human Development's Community Adolescent Reentry Services program on High Street in Springfield.

Seven young men worked with artists from The Performance Project to create a mural that depicted images of their everyday lives, struggles, strengths and dreams.

"There are tough moments and easy moments in my life. You just have to be strong. You have to continue to do things that help you move forward, not stuff that keeps you in the same place," Ibrahim said.

The Performance Project is a Springfield and Northampton-based arts group that works with adults and adolescents involved with the criminal justice system.

Artists met with the young men twice a week for several weeks, collaborating on the mural's images and messages ... identifying what was important to the boys, what they wanted to express.

"There's a lot of information out there in the media about youth and about people's lives, but it's not people representing themselves. It's people being represented in sound bites. It's one tiny aspect of the person's life but not the deeper picture," said Julie Lichtenberg, artistic director for The Performance Project.

The group did theater exercises together, acting out their ideas, developing ways of turning concepts into images before they began painting. In the mural, there is both despair and optimism.

"Struggle where you implode and succumb; struggle where you rise

above," Lichtenberg said.

And the mural represents the melting pot of the many cultures living in Springfield. Ibrahim is both Native American and Puerto Rican. The concept of roots was important to him.

"It's really important to know your roots; I really wanted to express that theme. How can you know where you're going if you don't know where you came from?"

The mural is being treated with an anti-graffiti lacquer before it will be hung outside the CARS offices sometime this month.

"I see this as a positive opportunity for the youth to express themselves," said Sean C. Hemingway, CARS program director.

"They took the reality of the challenges of growing up in an urban setting and were able to express it in a healthy way, working with adults in a positive way," he continued.

There are many themes and images in the mural.

A lone figure sits with his head down; a chained heart inside his chest explodes. It all represents struggle.

"We're trying to be an alternative media so people can publicly voice their own experiences or their own wisdom and understanding of themselves, their community, and their journey," Lichtenberg said.

The mural features two other central characters, individuals having a conversation; one has his hand on the other's shoulder ... a simple gesture of friendship. But the gesture was at first too simple for the artists, who then put a globe in the man's hand and stars connecting them both.

"Everybody who looks at it can get their own concept," Ibrahim said. "You can see all different people in different positions, but they're all connected by the stars."



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The Mural Painting Project was a collaboration between The Performance Project, Center for Human Development, and the Department of Youth Services, supported by Commonwealth Corporation. The project was facilitated by Carla Wojczuk and Julie Lichtenberg, and joined by artists Tony Lugo and Julissa Rodriguez and seven youths: Ricky Brown, Ky Dahn, Abraham Guzman, Mike Higgins (Jr) Shareef Ibrahim, Shawn Pafumi and Camry Starks. The mural will soon be mounted in Springfield at 160 High St.