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The "Mobilizing Our Community" project is meant to be a way for Zoellner Art Center to connect with the community during the pandemic. Hundreds of Lehigh Valley fourth graders have submitted their ideas to the project. (Courtesy of Kevin Reese)

Zoellner art distribution program connects with community 0

BY CHRISTINA PERRIER — ; PUBLISHED FEBRUARY 26, 2021, 4:00 PM COMMUNITY, LIFESTYLE

Hundreds of fourth graders from five different elementary schools in the Lehigh Valley will join together to draw an image of what community means to them. Artist Kevin Reese will materialize these images into large permanent mobiles that will live in the schools for years to come.

This project, titled "Mobilizing Our Community," is one of the art distribution programs Zoellner Arts Center has organized to encourage students to be creative and collaborative.

Mark Wilson, executive director of Zoellner Arts Center, said he wants the center to be a connection for the larger community during this time.

"What we say at Zoellner is 'arts have impact,'" Wilson said. "That's it. We want them to see that [the]arts can have impact. The arts can really help bring people together even in times of this struggle."

Zoellner has connected with Paxinosa Elementary, Parkway Manor Elementary, Brigadier General Anna Mae Hays, St. Anne School and Diocese of Allentown to participate in the project for the spring semester.

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Usually a hands-on, in-person experience, Reese said he has adapted his workshops to a remote format. Students will be meeting with him virtually throughout the next three months to create these structures.

Reese said he will be asking students to consider what community means to them, using their ideas and images to inform what shapes he will create for the mobile. When all of the pieces are in his studio, the children will decide where different pieces should go.

While Reese and the schools are creating mobiles for their own spaces, he will also be involving the students in creating mobiles for the Crayola LLC, which will live in Crayola Experience in Easton. Reese will be sending different pieces to different schools for the students to color with Crayola products, which will later be pieced together.

“We are starving for community right now, so the idea to be able to reflect on the importance of it to create something that represents that, that they will be able to enjoy for years to come, that’s my mission,” Reese said. “Mobiles are a wonderful metaphor for community. There are many, many different pieces – different shapes, and sizes, and colors all moving in relationship to each other. You see the individual pieces but you also see that that piece is part of a larger installation.”

Reese said he had some difficulties transitioning things over to the virtual realm and is anticipating a learning curve with this project, but it’s necessary for students to keep creating art despite these challenges. He hopes that this is the start of a long-term connection with the Lehigh Valley and that they can do in-person projects in the future.

Community school coordinator Jeanine Stanilious said she likes Reese’s program because it offers students at Paxinosa an opportunity for collaboration and aligns well with their school values.

“Once I heard what this project was, ‘Mobilizing Our Community,’ that is something that is very important for us at our school,” Stanilious said. “We’re always working with our students to really be proud of their community and the amazingness of the diversity in our school too. The title caught my eye in a hot minute.”

Zoellner has also connected with Northeast Middle School for a program with Kaila Mullady, a two-time world beatbox champion. The middle schoolers had their first virtual session Feb. 22 and will be having their second session March 1.

Mullady’s program teaches students and teachers the fundamentals of beatboxing and creative vocalization. Her program surrounds themes of building confidence, celebrating differences, embracing uniqueness, amplifying your voice and overall building life and communication skills.

Mullady will be creating a unifying piece that features the children at the end of the program.

Wilson said one of the reasons Zoellner chose this program is because the only thing students need is their voice. The program does not require that they purchase anything, which helps with participation equity and means students can continue creating even when the session ends.

Zoellner is also running a history program with American songster Dom Flemons and a percussion program with the group Third Coast Percussion at Charter Arts High School. Flemons will be teaching students about the history of Black musicians, as well as the lineage of Black musicians, country music and folk music.

Third Coast Percussion will be walking students through the origins of their ensemble, how they have adapted to COVID and holding a Q&A.

This program is nothing like anything Northeast students have participated in, said Denise Parker, the vocal music teacher at Northeast. She said she is thankful Zoellner connected Northeast to Mullady, who she described as being a "light" during this pandemic.

"This is the kind of stuff that makes our society and our world better because we grow when we learn, and when we share and when we get creative," Parker said.