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Young artists push beyond black and white

By Marc Larocque, Globe Correspondent | May 4, 2008

Lionel Blaise was in West Roxbury District Court in Jamaica Plain recently, standing in the lobby and staring at the walls. He did a year's worth of service leading up to this moment, almost every day after school. At one point, he came in to face a jury.

"I'm just glad it's over," said the 20-year-old Dorchester resident.

Blaise wasn't talking about a harrowing trial. And he hadn't been accused of wrongdoing.

He regularly visited the court as one of about 20 youths who volunteered for the Dorchester Community Center for the Visual Arts, also known as Dot Art, which was commissioned to create murals portraying the diverse community. The four paintings - each one 12 feet by 4 feet, in brilliant acrylics - were unveiled last month on the rotunda's high walls.

"It started with some sketches of conflicts in court," said Blaise, referring to his first drafts for the mural project, portraying a haughty prosecutor and an angry judge thrusting a gavel toward a defendant. "It was very dynamic."

But his initial plans were scrapped. It wasn't the right image.

The project was intended not just to add decor to the courts, but to send a message that encourages teamwork, self-esteem, and pride in achievement. One aspect of the project is that nearly half the 20 artists were on juvenile probation with the court, said Judge Kathleen Coffey, chief justice of West Roxbury District Court. The lengths of the juveniles' probations were not affected by participation.

"The whole purpose of probation is giving back to the community," Coffey said. "That's what probation is; it's forgiveness. The whole idea wasn't that we have good kids and bad kids. But we had children that were court-involved that were struggling with making good choices. We aligned them with children and artists to provide a role model."

The volunteers envisioned scenes of neighborhood unity, and a coordinator from Dot Art guided the project. For inspiration, Blaise and other participants visited the court last spring and observed a jury before drawing some more.

"It needed to convey the seriousness of the event," said Blaise, who was not one of the youths on probation. "I want to convey with what I paint. I never did anything like this before."

Now, the people at West Roxbury District Court - the mothers, the brothers, the children, the lawyers, the innocent, the guilty, and the judges - are conducting business in a new atmosphere.

The once bland, white rotunda space is adorned by images of community solidarity: hard hat-clad worker perched on a ladder; folks shaking hands in front of a public bus; a mysterious, twilight vignette of the Forest Hills train station with a woman in the foreground looking up at a clock; and a multi-ethnic jury whose members are thoughtfully posed with an American flag draped behind them.

"We are part of the community and we reflect the community," Coffey said. "The best part is it was designed and painted by children who live in the neighborhoods of Boston."

Reinventing Justice, a task force founded by Coffey in 1997, lobbied for the project three years ago, raising about \$2,000 through the American Bar Association and private grants. No tax dollars were used in the project, she said.

The juveniles who were entwined in the court system were referred by a probation officer and were screened by a coordinator at Dot Art, Leslie MacWeeney. MacWeeney tried out their abilities in the court lobby by having them draw a Converse sneaker in February 2007.

The murals went on display just in time for Law Day, an annual celebration coordinated by Reinventing Justice for which 150 Boston schoolchildren gathered last month to hear inspirational speeches. The project echoes the efforts of Dot Art's first mural project in 1999, a painting that memorialized murdered Assistant District Attorney Paul McLaughlin, which was installed in the Suffolk County district attorney's downtown office. Coffey said the West Roxbury court will keep the new mural indefinitely. ■

