

Sarasota County art teacher comes full circle



Tyler Isaacson, Lauren Johnson, Brooks Tracey, Haylie Smith and Taylor Johnson

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For Brooks Tracey, coming home means giving back.

by: **Anna Brugmann** Staff Writer

For Brooks Tracey, what goes around comes around.

Thirteen years ago, Tracey sat in room 411 at Sarasota Middle School, hunched over a table working on a project for his art teacher, Elaine Gale.

Now retired, Gale remembers Tracey's drive. He took his work seriously no matter the project, and this project was no different. It was for an art program called Coexistence, which encouraged students and professional artists to explore diversity through art.

"I focused on making all my students aware of the destructive power of prejudice and intolerance on humanity," Gale said. "I tried to teach my students the fragility of life and how it can be destroyed with hatred."

The program selects submissions that appear in its annual art show at Bayfront Park.

At the time Tracey participating in the program, Gale was also teaching her students about one of the most powerful examples of hate — the Holocaust.

Tracey's piece depicted a person crying, a number tattooed on their arm.

Although Gale remembers the power of his piece, Tracey said he didn't reflect on the impact of the project until much later.

Since Tracey's middle school days, Coexistence, now called Embracing Our Differences, continues to empower young artists to discuss diversity. The scope of the program has expanded.

Since 2004, more than 235,000 students have participated. It's grown from a statewide art program and show to an international showcase. Last year's Embracing Our Differences show included selections from 106 local schools and schools around the world.

As for Tracey, he's back in room 411 at Sarasota Middle School.

"They show us how we can show without words what we want to say."

-Lauren Johnson, Sarasota Middle School student

Gale retired in June 2016, and she's passed her baton to Tracey.

"I'm always thinking to myself how lucky I am," Tracey said. "When I'm going to staff meetings and I'm sitting there, people who are once my teachers and mentors are now my colleagues. I'm really honored to come back to this school."

And now, he's administering the Embracing Our Differences program as a teacher.

"When I started teaching the lesson myself, I really started to reflect on my experience with it when I was doing it as a student," Tracey said "It was even more powerful looking back on it now."

His students spend three to four weeks on the project, discussing their composition and message.

"We give each other a lot of tips on what we want to draw," Sarasota Middle School student Lauren Solomon said. "They show us how we can show without words what we want to say."

The subject matter varies. Some pieces are thought provoking and challenging. Others are funny and cute.

Sarasota Middle School seventh grader Taylor Johnson's piece depicts a series of seals all balancing balls except one except one that is balancing a pineapple.



Taylor Johnson

“That’s one of the really interesting parts of the project. They’re really open to just trying things,” Tracey said.

For Tracey, the power of the project is how the pieces confront issues of diversity. His students are sixth, seventh and eighth graders learning to become young adults and express themselves in the midst of transition. But their work is a testament to the power of the artistic medium.

“I would say that artwork is a strong way to start conversations when it comes to change,” Tracey said.

Two students from Tracey’s class had works selected for previous showcases. And in 2015, Tracey’s own piece was selected.

“It’s a huge honor, but it’s got the backseat to when I get a student’s work in,” Tracey said.

To Gale, Tracey’s continued participation in the program is proof of the enduring power of the program’s message.

“The whole fact that we need to come together, that we need to conquer hatred and prejudice — and unfortunately it’s still going on — the message is multigenerational,” Gale said. “Hopefully we will be able to reach a lot of people through EOC. I think it’s needed more now ... It has to continue.