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Oklahoma Teachers Use Art Competition to Explore Diversity

OKLAHOMA CITY - "Children's souls are the purest soil in which to plant seeds of tolerance," says Colleen Lasiello, a kindergarten teacher at Ranchwood Elementary School in Yukon.

Lasiello nurtures tolerance in her students by participating in the annual Respect Diversity Art & Poetry Contest, a project of the Respect Diversity Foundation. The Foundation seeks to help students of all ages understand all cultures, including their own, and uses its annual art and poetry competition to help students explore issues of cultural diversity, human rights and global peace.

Lasiello has been involved with the Foundation for about five years, and her students have placed first in the competition for two consecutive years. Her students' entries have included African dolls made out of bottles and a wheelchair made of paper-mâché.

Her goal remains the same for each group of students she works with – to provide them a unique opportunity to learn about differences, tolerance, problem solving, critical thinking and working collaboratively. She says teaching her students empathy has become as important to her classroom as teaching math and reading.

"It doesn't take the world's greatest teacher to produce an educated mind, but to educate the soul, now that's my life's inspiration," said Lasiello.

It's not just the teachers and students who participate in the competition who can receive an education for the soul – the 100 collaborative works of art and poetry entered in the competition will be on display at the Gaylord-Pickens Oklahoma Heritage Museum in Oklahoma City from March 25 to May 8. Students of all ages and from across Oklahoma will be represented in the new Museum's Tulsa World Gallery.

Each piece of art will be accompanied by an information card about the motivational factors behind the piece.

When presented with the opportunity to display the Respect Diversity exhibit, the new Museum jumped at the chance to include artwork that so well fits its mission.

"The Gaylord-Pickens Oklahoma Heritage Museum focuses on telling Oklahoma's story through its people," said Shannon Nance, president. "The Oklahomans we have chosen to showcase throughout the Museum are all very different – in profession, geography, culture and periods of history – so that we can accurately show the diversity of our state's people and how they have worked together through the years to create this place we call home. Presenting the Respect Diversity exhibit this year gives us yet another opportunity to show young Oklahomans working together to inspire tolerance and acceptance of others."

An opening reception for the exhibit will be held on Tuesday, March 25. The event begins at 5 p.m. with an awards program, and State Superintendent Sandy Garrett and Lyn Adams, director of the Oklahoma City Children's Theatre, will present awards to winning schools. Teachers throughout Oklahoma who register to attend by March 10 will receive Multicultural Professional Development Points.

Though Lasiello would be thrilled with another first place win in the competition, she is most grateful for the opportunity to provide young children a chance to discuss differences.

“Children recognize differences as a social skill, and to discourage them from exploring those differences just because it makes most adults are uncomfortable leads to another generation of awkward ignorance,” said Iasiello.

The Gaylord-Pickens Oklahoma Heritage Museum is located at NW 13th Street and Shartel Avenue in Oklahoma City. The Museum is open Tuesday through Friday from 9 a.m. to 5 p.m., and Saturday from 12 p.m. to 5 p.m. Admission is \$7 for adults and \$5 for seniors and students. For more information about the Museum, call 405.235.4458 or visit www.oklahomaheritage.com. For more information about the Respect Diversity Foundation or Art & Poetry Competition, call 405.359.0369 or visit www.respectdiversity.org.

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