



January 2, 2020

## Students Break Down Barriers in PeaceQuest Art Challenge

*By Ty Schalter*

When young people from different backgrounds get together and create, it's tempting to think there's nothing standing in the way of equality and equity for all. But in the spring of 2019, high school and elementary students from all around the greater Lansing area were challenged to consider how the barriers in our society negatively impact our ability to live, love, and learn from each other as equals.

PeaceQuest, a local Lansing program founded to celebrate the U.N.'s International Day of Peace, hosts a series of events during the month of September—one of which is the PeaceQuest Art Challenge Exhibit. Thirty Holt art students submitted a piece for consideration. Submitted works, along with accompanying essays, had to reflect the show's 2019 theme of "Differences, Justice, and Equality." Per the organization's website, "Segregation can be seen in our places of worship, schools, neighborhoods, and in entertainment and the arts, which inhibits interactions between people who are different and decreases our ability to appreciate and learn from one another."

Holt art teacher Heidi Irvine played an important role in raising awareness of the competition, in which Holt has participated since the annual show's inception eight years ago. "When I get the show information, I post it near my classroom," Ms. Irvine told Ram Quarterly, and she typically emails the information out to the Art Club as well. "I usually try to figure out which of my lessons can be adapted to fit the contest." Students who choose to enter must meet the contest deadline, then give Ms. Irvine their sign-up information and a required essay. She then works with the other art teachers to winnow the submissions down to the maximum number the district is allowed.

In late fall, entrants gathered at Michigan State University's Erickson Kiva for the announcement of the juried finalists and prize-winners. Holt's Neveah Collins, Jocelyn Nowland, and Aliana Magruder were selected as finalists, and Foster Gonzalez and Chloe Blanchard were named honorable mentions. Amanda Szymborski, Iyanna Reid, Roberto Garcia, and Emily McNamara all won cash prizes, and Lise Aasa won third place overall in the competition. That's 10 Holt finalists selected out of 40, and seven selected for the traveling exhibit out of 20!

Selected pieces are first shown at MSU's Wharton Center for Performing Arts, then spend months traveling throughout the state on exhibit. Completed pieces not selected for the traveling exhibit are displayed at the celebration of learning or another showcase event.

"My students enjoy the feedback from the show and are sometimes surprised at how effective a great piece of art can be at getting people to talk," Ms. Irvine said. "I hope they all feel empowered by the process."

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