

Strip District exhibit features artwork of homeless young adults

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By Mary Niederberger / Pittsburgh Post-Gazette

When 23-year-old Niecey had a chance to paint a picture that reflected on her struggles with homelessness, she created a beach scene with a palm tree and sand.

The artwork puzzled those working with her until she explained that it represented her safe place.

“This place was made from my own imagination. It’s an escape from reality, from the real world, from having all of these different emotions that I don’t talk about because I don’t trust people, and the shootings and the murders. This helps me escape from this world,” Niecey said in an audio recording that accompanies the painting.

Niecey, a pseudonym used by the homeless artist, is among several dozen homeless young people whose artwork will be displayed and auctioned tonight at 21st Street Coffee and Tea in the Strip District. The event, which will take place from 6 to 8 p.m., will include a silent auction and performances of original music and poetry readings by some of the homeless young people.



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The exhibit is titled “We Live Here” and is organized by the Homeless Children’s Education Fund, Art Expression Inc., the Gay and Lesbian Community Center of Pittsburgh and the Hear Me Project of Carnegie Mellon University.

The artwork, about 60 pieces in all, was created by homeless men and women between the ages of 18 and 26 during spring and summer workshops at the GLCC’s drop-in center Downtown with support and supplies from Art Expression.

Proceeds from the sales will go to the artists, some of whom have agreed to donate 10 percent of their profits back to the program.

“This is a way for the youth to generate income and it’s a way for their voices to be heard,” said Jennifer Rozell, an art facilitator for Art Expression.

Ms. Rozell said working on the projects gave the young people an outlet for some of their emotions. “It seems like the art just sort of opens people up,” Ms. Rozell said.

Grace Enick, an intern and volunteer who worked with the young people on the project, said painting “was such a cool way to get to know them and hear about their stories and what they are going through.”

The project started in June when the homeless young adults got sketchbooks and pencils. Later they received supplies for painting and sculpture.

Some of the pieces of artwork will be accompanied by audio recordings, like the one made by Niecey. They were made possible through the Hear Me project.

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One of the recordings is from a transgender young person who uses the pseudonym Aiden.

Aiden said he drew a circle of dark and light because “your emotions go every which way.”

“Your life goes in a circle, sometimes it’s good, sometimes it’s bad,” he said.

Aiden tells of how his father, who could not accept his lifestyle, kicked him out of the

house when he was 16 and forced him to live in a travel trailer. At age 18, he said, his father kicked him out completely.

He said he lost friends and family when they found out about his lifestyle. “I know what that pain feels like and I would never, ever do that to anyone,” he said, adding that he has since reunited with his mother.

Aiden’s message of hope is: “Everybody can follow their dreams. To have someone to believe in you is one of the best things in the world.”

Aric Bush, who said he lived on the streets for two years after graduating from Duquesne University, will perform a song tonight based on his experiences with homelessness and mental illness, including a bipolar diagnosis.

“When I was homeless for a while, I found people just look down on you. They don’t even recognize you as a person,” he said. “We should give them resources to get themselves back on their feet. They just need somebody to give them a lifeline, to throw a rope out to them.”

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