The Power of Art to Connect Students and the Community

For the past 25 years, SHARP Literacy has had the privilege of impacting many children, educators and families through our curriculum and imaginative learning experiences that build confidence, self-esteem and a greater awareness of the world.

SHARP has had an impact on our larger community as well. Collaborative art projects bring students and local artists together to create artworks inspired by the history, language and stories shared in our workshops. Students study a subject, learn related vocabulary and work together to create artwork that is exhibited publicly throughout diverse neighborhoods in Milwaukee and Waukesha for everyone to enjoy.

One of the earliest and most engaging stories comes from the Connected to Communities project and mural, which was funded by a generous grant from We Energies through the Wisconsin Energy Corporation Foundation and created by 3rd grade students at Messmer Grade School with artist Sally Duback in 2002.

When it came time to unveil the Connected to Communities mural, Dick Abdoo, Chairman and CEO of We Energies at the time, was invited to join the students at Messmer to celebrate the event. Mr. Abdoo agreed but his office insisted he only had 15 minutes to take part in the celebrations. Once at Messmer, the students brought Mr. Abdoo into the classroom, showed him what they had learned and explained the process of creating the mural.

About an hour and a half later, Mr. Abdoo left the building, exclaiming that he was “blown away” by the students, and had committed to another significant donation. The resulting Mosaic of Culture mural engaged 6 artists, 1,000 students, 34 teachers and 8 principals from a diverse group of schools across the city in a program about cultural diversity. Thanks to Dick Abdoo, that amazing mural was unveiled in 2005 at General Mitchell International Airport on the 2nd Floor Skywalk where thousands of visitors can still view it every day.

SHARP’s community art projects provide students with the opportunity to strengthen critical thinking and learn to express themselves through art. Since SHARP’s beginning, thousands of students have worked with multiple local artists over the years to create more than 27 artworks. Many of these can still be seen at locations throughout our community including Discovery World, Marquette University, Carroll University, Frame Park and others.