

Libraries become art galleries

Students art on display during March

It might still be dull and gray outside, but if you walk into many of the libraries in Waukesha County this month, you will see nothing but vibrant color. Rows of paintings, photographs, sculptures, and more line the walls and the bookshelves at the public libraries in Eagle, Oconomowoc, Sussex, Delafield, Waukesha and Menomonee Falls. Not only are these pieces a vivid reminder of spring, they're also a celebration of creativity, the arts and the students who made them. The art is gathered and displayed for Youth Art Month, a national celebration which runs throughout March, turning each library into a visually striking art gallery.

Youth Art Month is possible through collaboration between local schools and the libraries, who work together to offer a positive experience for the artists and the public. Anywhere from 60 to almost 700 works of art are displayed at the libraries, all created by local students ranging in grade level from kindergarten to high school. Some of the

pieces on display this year include self-portrait paintings and photographs, mosaics, and intricate sculptures made of paper and straws.

"The talent is amazing. We get comments everyday about how wonderful it is," said Karol Kennedy, director of the Menomonee Falls Public Library, whose library has hundreds of pieces on display.

Turning the library into an art gallery space may seem outside the norm, but hosting Youth Art Month shows fits into the mission of each library as a way to offer access to knowledge and information.

"Our library and our community are committed to celebrating, promoting, and helping people learn about the arts, and this annual event is part of that commitment," said Betsy Bleck, director at Oconomowoc Public Library, which partners with the Oconomowoc Junior Woman's Club to put



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on the art show.

At Pauline Haass Public Library in Sussex, "the art teachers connect people to information by posting commentary about the techniques used and the skills gained by students for each project, giving viewers a much better insight into how art is created," library director Kathy Klager said. She added art can provide commentary on the world around us, which "causes people to stop and think, connecting them to ideas."

Supporting the student artists is another component of Youth Art Month at the libraries. During the month, many of the libraries host receptions and awards programs to honor the young artists. Some of the libraries also encourage the public to interact with the art by voting on their favorite pieces or providing commentary on the artwork with comment forms, which the teachers then pass along to their students.

"It's so meaningful for these students to read praise from those in their community!" Klager said

Supporting art doesn't end on March 31, though. The Brookfield Public Library hosts art displays from area students in May, while the Town Hall Library in North Lake hosts exhibits of local art in their hallway gallery space all year long. Art programs and classes for all ages run throughout the year at many libraries as well.

Youth Art Month collaborations prove that the value of libraries goes beyond the books and movies on the shelves. As people wander from piece to piece, as students pose in front of their artwork, smiling at the camera, we see evidence that the library is a true gathering place, that each library's value lies in providing a space where people come together to learn, share ideas, and connect with each other. Like the best art, public libraries continue to encourage us to see the world — and each other — in new ways.

(Jill Fuller is coordinator of marketing and communications for the Bridges Library System.)