

# The Miami Herald

Posted on Tue, Nov. 02, 2010

## Mural a testament to teens' redemption

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The Miami Herald

After teens robbed him of his gold chain on a Liberty City playground, Jonas Ortiz knew what he had to do next. He walked away.

“As they jumped me, I looked across the street at the mural we were painting,” said Ortiz, 16. “I’m a philosopher now, not a gangster.”

So Ortiz brushed himself off, held his head up, and went back to work to share his life story with a paint brush.

On Saturday, Ortiz and 11 post-detention colleagues proudly unveiled a mural on non-violence created with support from three nonprofit groups: ArtSpring, the Belafonte-Tacolcy Center and Empowered Youth Neighborhood.

The youngsters are participating in a program organized in cooperation with the Miami-Dade juvenile court system to help them stay out of trouble.

Dozens cheered as Alison Austin, a candidate for Miami Commissioner, ripped the paper off the 9-by-40-foot mural at 951 NW 62nd St. that faces the Belafonte Park basketball courts.

“These young men redirected their energy to give back to the community,” said Austin, who also serves as CEO of the Belafonte-Tacolcy Center.

Students shared stories about images on the mural that reflect their lives grappling with neighborhood crime and violence.

“When you fell, we extended a hand to help you back up,” said Miami-Dade Circuit Judge Orlando Prescott, who heads the court’s juvenile division and helped set up the program that gives young offenders a second chance. “You are opening a new chapter in your lives.”

The mural proclaims “stories told with glory” and is peppered with stars, flowers, a tree and different colors.

Ortiz said it is meant to send a message of peace, especially since so many teens were killed in the area last summer in drive-by shootings.

“The kids developed a story that reads from left to right, just like a book,” said Markus Tracy, an artist with ArtSpring, a non-profit that helps inmates and others who are at-risk express themselves through art. “It is a launching pad for them to grow and follow their dreams.”

Tracy, an award-winning artist who has worked on large-scale mural projects in New Mexico and Nevada, said he spent about a month with the teens painting the mural.

Twice a week, teens trotted across the street from their court-ordered diversion program to mix paint, climb ladders, and don brushes.

The art work is more complicated than it looks, according to Tracy, as it uses math, science, scale and color to tell a story.

“There are many layers to it,” adds Tracy. “You may have to look at it several times to understand it.”

Aside from having fun and learning, students had pending charges against them dropped and their records will be cleared.

Tracy said he sees art as a tool that can address neighborhood crime, rehabilitate troubled teens, and strengthen communities.

Clutching his diploma from the program, soft-spoken Alfred Williams, 15, admired the work where he expressed himself as a butterfly on a journey struggling to advance to the next stage of life.

“I am out of the cocoon now,” said Williams. “Now it's time for me to shoot for the stars.”

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