

The Alebrijes of Nina Otero

Southside schools to see more art programming in 2020



ARTsmart sends visiting artists to work with students at Nina Otero Community School with the help of funders who also plan to target middle schools with extra art programs next year. | Katherine Lewin

By Katherine Lewin

Santa Fe Reporter 12/18/2019

Just inside Nina Otero Community School, a group of students works on a paper mural, spread across the wall and held up by tape. They discuss next steps, loudly, as they bring to life their own versions of *alebrijes*, fantastical creatures first created in Mexico.

This mural, and two others in progress at Ortiz Middle School and Camino Real Academy, are part of the Visiting Artist Programs provided for local schools by ARTsmart, a nonprofit that supports art programming for youth in Northern New Mexico.

But this semester's murals are just the beginning for Santa Fe's Southside. Starting next year, ARTsmart will prioritize Title 1 and Southside middle schools for Visiting Artist Programs to address a gap in middle school art options in Santa Fe. Title 1 schools are institutions with a large concentration of low-income students that receive federal funds.

The focus is possible because of the Hestia Fund, money pledged by a group of women who want to increase what's available for that age group in Santa Fe. ARTsmart agreed that students between 11 and 13 in Santa Fe were not getting the same access to art instruction as other age groups.

In the mural program, says Amanda Thomas, executive director at ARTsmart, "the students work with a client in mind. In this particular setting, it's the school. They make designs typically, each program has a variance, typically students make proposals or meet with the client to see needs, they come up with a variety of designs, narrow it down, then the client selects. Then they work in a team setting, executing something creative as a group, which a lot of them haven't experienced."

Thomas tells SFR the program will get "extra emphasis" soon. "It's really beautiful because it supports the local artists economy, connects students to local artists in our community, exposing them to different art forms and techniques, media, different cultures, all while exposing them to potential careers in art and design," she says.

ARTsmart's programs are in every Santa Fe public elementary and middle school in the district. They alternate between Capital and Santa Fe high schools each year. ARTsmart also operates in the Española school district, Genoveva Chavez Community Center and at the county's juvenile detention center.

Current Ortiz Middle School visiting artist and ARTsmart instructor Mariel Garcia joined the nonprofit in 2014 with a background in ceramics, drawing and painting, among others.

The nonprofit is raising additional funds for El Camino Real's Visiting Artist Program because the school has proposed a more comprehensive program with multiple visiting artists for the future.

The students at El Camino Real are currently working on a series of projects with different artists called Creating Along the Camino. Artists from SITE Santa Fe visit the classrooms at Camino Real and work on projects on the themes of immigration, migration and freedom. The students also get to visit SITE Santa Fe regularly.

The mural program at Camino Real does more than introduce students to the arts.

The students of color at El Camino Real trust their white teachers more than before thanks to this year's theme and the bridge visiting artist Israel Haros Lopez built with art between the students and their teacher, according to Sarah Mandala, the program director at ARTsmart.

Haros is an artist with the Alas de Agua Art Collective.

Students at Capital High School in the ARTsmart program worked with artists Kevin and Jennifer Box. They went to the artists' solar-powered studio, set up on 35 acres outside of the city. The students created their own origami sculptures from cast metal with guidance from the Boxes.

ARTsmart also provides weekly arts instructors and workshops after school at Sweeney Elementary School and El Camino Real Academy through a separate program.

Angelina Moore, principal at Nina Otero Community School, was the client for the students at her school. She's happy to see the children working together and proud to hang the mural at Nina. "I think that art gives students an outlet to express not only who they are as a person, but in this instance of the mural, it's about Nina as a community," Moore says.

"There's a sense of students as individual artists but also as storytellers for what's important to our school."

The students from Nina Otero and Ortiz will get to see their work displayed at the Southside Library in the fall as part of the program, according to Mandala, the program director. The murals will then return to their respective schools to hang indefinitely.

Yatziry, a middle school student at Nina Otero Community School working on the alebrije mural when SFR visits, loves the time she gets to paint. "We can be creative and do it our own way," Yatziry says.