

Toll of gun violence shapes teens' art

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A work of art by a student from the Chicago Angels Project.

You walk past the pet store, up a narrow staircase and as soon as you reach the top there they are, against a stark white wall, in a room bathed in light. Something about the getting to this exhibit seems so right for the *Chicago Angels Project — The Forgotten: Chicago Youth Lost By Gun Violence*.

OPINION

The Chicago Angels project is the brainchild of Laurie Glenn, and it brings together her two passions in life: art and social justice. Through a chance turn of events, ThinkArt – Glenn’s salon that uses art to spark conversation about politics – has taken the works done for one special project by students at Uplift Community High School and is giving them a showing outside the Uptown-based school’s walls. Under the supervision of art teacher Laura Mullkoff, the students created homages to other young Chicagoans who died by gun violence. Mullkoff remembers the spring day the students headed to the school library to read through news stories and choose their subjects. What moments before had been a talkative group turned silent and they “took it really, really seriously” as they went through the stories. Often it was a stranger whose situation resonated with them, but sometimes the subject was someone they knew. Photos of the victim, a word or key phrase and sometimes other images are united on the mosaic linoleum relief prints that the students created.

The artwork might have remained a project viewed solely by the school community except for that chance meeting between Mullkoff and Glenn, who knew the art teacher’s husband. They were all seeing – and being

moved by – Marcus Gardley’s play about gun violence in Chicago, “The Gospel of Loving Kindness.” During intermission, Glenn was talking about how she wanted to bring attention to young people who’ve been victims, to make people see them as more than just news headlines. Mullkoff mentioned the work of her students and with that, the project took off.

Glenn turned to others in the arts community to make this happen. Josef Glimmer offered the space of his namesake River North gallery for this exhibition, which also features works on the theme of violence by a number of Chicago artists. Tiphonie Spencer’s Arts Palette, which connects patrons and artists, is another partner. A portion of all sales will go to three non-profits, two that work extensively on anti-violence efforts.

There’s something compelling about seeing the violence done to young people through the eyes of their peers. The exhibit is a stark reminder how the violence impacts an entire generation. Also, as Spencer pointed out, you look at these collages to the victims and “you can feel that energy of who they are.” To Glenn it is important for all of Chicago to realize “these are our children ... our greatest assets.” That’s one reason she wanted the exhibit to be out of the neighborhood. The people in the communities hardest hit by violence understand the toll. Bringing it to River North puts a human face on what Glenn describes as a “daily war on our children.”

As a true believer in the power of art, Glenn really would like the mayor and our governor – who just took a machete to a number of social programs – to see this exhibition, which continues through Feb. 27. “Art helps to build political will to change the world,” says Glenn.

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