

?My Dreams Are Becoming Real? Showcases Refugee Student Art ^[1]

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By:

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Above: a mural created by several student refugee artists.

In the warm and brightly-lit interior of local Mediterranean restaurant Tabooli, a group of teenagers occupied a long table. Their animated chatter was obscured by the hubbub of patrons viewing the art displayed on the opposite wall.

The teens were part of a refugee foster care program at Detroit-based nonprofit Samaritas, whose Lansing branch organized an art exhibition called "My Dreams Are Becoming Real" that opened Monday night with a reception at Tabooli as part of World Refugee Awareness Week.

Works of art created by refugee children (the vast majority of whom are teenagers) in the Samaritas program over a period of several weeks this spring were displayed at the restaurant, which provided free food. The teenaged artists roamed the restaurant, chatting with curious patrons.

Edgar Lopez, 18, one of the refugees in the program as well as the event photographer, undertook an epic journey from Guatemala to Detroit by a combination of bus and foot.

"It was hard," Lopez said. "It wasn't an easy trip. We tried to get on the bus, but when there was immigration police there, we had to get out of the bus and walk around them so they cannot catch us."

Once in Detroit, Lopez found a foster family who directed him to the Independent Living program offered by Samaritas. The program gave him the resources to live on his own in Lansing while attending high school and working to support his family in Guatemala.

Lopez's case is typical for a teenager in the Samaritas foster care program. According to Michelle Haskell, the program's Outreach Team Leader, helping refugee children develop into independent and productive adults is the primary focus of the program.

"Our goal for everyone is independence," Haskell said. "Usually the youth in our program cannot be adopted, and it's typically because a lot of them come from war-torn countries, and so you cannot get those necessary documents to make that adoption legal."

Further complicating the process, Haskell said, is the fact that many of the children's parents are dead or missing. Because of this, participants in the program tend to develop strong relationships with their foster families.

"We have kids that once they are old enough, they legally change their last name to their foster parents'," Haskell said. "We have one that has named his children after his foster mom. So it tends to be kind of those lifelong bonds."

Diego Ixcotoyaz, 20, another Guatemalan refugee in the Samaritas program, enjoys such a relationship with his foster family, who manage the Zoup Franchise in Lansing.

"I work there on Saturdays," Ixcotoyaz said. "They're planning to grow the brand and I'm looking forward to being a part of that business."



In addition to working at Zoup, Ixcotoyaz lives and works at Summerplace Townhomes in Lansing, an apartment complex that focuses on resettling refugees. Ixcotoyaz's project for the art exhibition (above) is a photograph of a sculpture at Summerplace that he helped to design and create.

"It's a pole and it says 'Peace prevail on Earth,'" Ixcotoyaz said. Ixcotoyaz, who owns and manages the sculpture area, appreciates the impact the sculpture has had on the Summerplace community. "It gives hope to the people."

"It inspired me because we were the ones who built it," Ixcotoyaz said. "We came up with the idea."



Like Ixcotoyaz's photograph, every work of art at the exhibition had a story behind it. One

drawing on display was a charcoal sketch (above) by Razmin Ahmadzada.

When Ahmadzada was thirteen, he had to flee his home country of Afghanistan to avoid the Taliban, who threatened him after they discovered he had opened his own art workshop to teach younger children how to paint and draw. After fleeing to Iran, where he worked in construction and studied for three years with an artist he admired, Ahmadzada returned to Afghanistan to have another go at his business.

The Taliban returned, and this time, with his uncle's help, he fled to Indonesia, where he waited for passage to the United States. Ahmadzada arrived in Detroit, and found the Samaritas program. Now nineteen, he received his GED from the Global Institute of Lansing, and now studies art in California.

Ixcotoyaz summed up his feelings about coming to the United States: "When I was in my country, I couldn't see my future there," he said. "I feel like here you can get what you need. It's like your future is in your hands."

"My Dreams Are Becoming Real" will remain at Tabooli, located at 515 W. Grand River, through June 24, after which it will move to the headquarters of event sponsor Delta Dental in Okemos.



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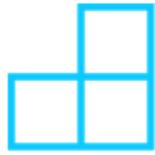
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