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AMSA eighth graders have art displayed at U.S. Department of Education over the summer



It's one thing for a student to have their artwork displayed in the halls of their school. Walk through either campus of [Anoka Middle School for the Arts \(AMSA\)](#), and one can see just that. Drawings, paintings, photos – artwork is everywhere.

But it's something else entirely to have that artwork displayed at the nerve center of public education in America: the U.S. Department of Education building in Washington, D.C.

But over the summer, the work of four distinguished AMSA students was a part of a 64-piece exhibit at the building in the nation's capitol, according to AMSA English Language Arts (ELA) teacher Kristen Gifford. The students, Katherine Andrews, Peyton Arndt, Britta Larson and Shea O'Brien are now freshmen at Anoka High School.

"I tell my students all the time – writing isn't about the classroom, it's about the real world," she said. "It's not just in the walls of the school that your writing matters – there's a whole world out there that want to hear what you have to say, and this is an example of that, and it inspires me and the kids."

Larson said she was surprised her piece, which was an artful, black and white bouquet of flowers, was even selected for the exhibit. "I'm proud, but it was surprising. I didn't think mine would get picked for it," she said.

Gifford said the opportunity to have artwork be a part of the Washington, D.C. exhibit sprang from the “Artful Writing Program” professional development workshop she was a part of a couple summers ago at the Weisman Art Museum at the University of Minnesota.

“The workshop discussed how to use art to inspire writing,” she said. Following the workshop, she helped create a new lesson based off of what she learned. Then last year, as part of the new unit, Gifford’s eighth grade advanced ELA course went to the Minneapolis Institute of Art and students were asked to pick a piece of art that intrigued them. Based off their individual selections, they were then asked to develop a research topic based off of it and write a paper. “It could be anything – a symbol or a feeling evoked – so long as it was derived from the art they had seen,” Gifford said.



The unit culminated in an art project at the end of the year where they created a piece of art of their own that speaks back to the artwork that initially intrigued them at the museum. “It’s a bit of a circular process where the students see art and make art,” Gifford said. “But it really develops some critical and deep thinking skills.”

Around the same time the unit was finished, Gifford said she received word from Jamee Young, the facilitator of the workshop she had taken at the Weisman two years ago, that the Association of Museum Art Directors was looking for student artwork to be displayed in the U.S. Department of Education building in Washington, D.C.

“So we submitted some of the pieces of artwork created and were lucky enough to have four student pieces selected,” she said.

While proud of her artwork that went on display, Larson said she was most happy with the writing she did in support of the artwork. “That was my favorite part about it,” she said.

AMSA Curriculum Integrator Jolanda Dranchak said having students be a part of the display was a huge honor, not only for the students, but also for the school. “Our AMSA students – they were the only ones from the whole state to be a part of the exhibit,” she said. “How cool is that?”

As for the display, Gifford said she did make time to go see it over the summer. “For me it was kind of abstract until I saw it. It’s a really big honor, but it’s in Washington, D.C. and it’s there and we’re here. But when I saw it – it was pretty cool.”

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