



Realizing Your Potential

The Runaway Homeless Youth of El Paso Center for Children

El Paso is a large and predominately Hispanic city in Texas that is nestled on the border of Ciudad Juarez, Mexico. Although our children come from all areas of The United States, many of them are El Paso Natives calling the Border City their home. These children ages 13-17 come to us with unique experiences, yet the one thing they feel they have in common is their struggles. These struggles include worrying about their family, their wellbeing and understanding where they fall in the spectrum of the big world ahead of them. What we teach them at the Center for Children is not only that their immediate needs are met and that they are in a safe and loving environment, but also that we concentrate on strengths.

Although we all have problems and obstacles that cross our path on a regular basis, no one can take away the positive aspects within us that help us stay afloat. In order to prosper in life you must keep moving forward no matter what life throws at you and ensure you reiterate those strengths and implement them into your positive thought process to be able to move harmoniously in the direction of your dreams.

The process of creating this mural came from the vision of the most marginalized, high risk and sensitive people in our community today. These youth are the future of our city and of our country. Not everything in the mural is positive, as is true in their lives. These children spent countless hours on this mural coming together as a cohesive group to create something that is part of themselves, but also a one-of-a kind representation of the promise and understanding they have that they will all continue to thrive. Many of these youth have never worked towards anything so impactful and eye opening, and the fact that their creativity, thoughts and aspirations are going to be entered into a national competition has been an exciting and motivating experience for everyone involved and we are grateful for this opportunity.

The El Paso Center for Children-Emergency Shelter staff has seen first-hand the progress that these youth have made during their stay at the shelter whether it is 24 hours or a few weeks of stay, it is through our added services such as expressing their emotions through art that they are able to open up at a level that they might not otherwise have been able to. If you simply listen, one can learn who they really are, even behind their pain. Our youth in turn will listen and learn from you. If we were to win this competition, the children involved and other future clients would have the ability to continue using art as a way to express their creativity and use their strengths to better their lives.



The base of the mural depicts the desert scene of El Paso. A desert also represents the obstacles and hardships that stand in between people and their dreams. The flames were an idea that came from our youngest child. They further accentuate the harsh reality of the state that some of our kids arrive when they first enter the shelter. Another youth added they can use those flames and turn the negative around by “Being fearless in the pursuit of what sets your soul on fire.” The mural incorporates a rail road that extends across the entire canvas. It serves as a vessel that encompasses the nine words that these children have identified as their strength and motivation. The children equally helped decide what words would be used in between the tracks that lead them to their full potential. The idea is that although they start from nothing, they can ultimately achieve whatever their heart desires with the right tools, support and motivation. They thought of incorporating a rail road because there is one right in front of our shelter and they realized it travels all across the U.S. to benefit the entire nation, as they will one day. The oldest of the group thought to add the quote “Success doesn’t come to you, you go to it!” This really helped excite others about their individual path to reach their full potential.

The ten students involved each identified their strengths and used those to determine what career would best showcase their talents and help them love their job so they can prosper emotionally as well as financially. Sports Medicine, Dance Therapist, Hair Dresser, Forensic Scientist, Makeup artist, and Detective were the careers the children felt would allow them to reach their full potential and live the life they have dreamed of.

The rail road that descends from the desert leads them on the path to success that ends high in the beautiful sky. They know that if they stay on this path and use their strengths, they will soon reach those goals. The youth used a mixed medium approach to create the mural. Every day the children added more and more until the final product was reached, overcoming barriers and problems that were found along the way. Each youth chose a different medium to incorporate, chose at least one strength based word, had input on the design and quotes, and chose their dream career they realized will allow them to reach their full potential. They used actual sand scraped from the ground outside of the shelter for the desert landscape. Multiple packs of glue sticks were used to secure the railroad made from wood blocks and wooden rulers. Glue was also used to create the cacti made from felt, pipe cleaners and tooth picks. The images were created from free hand drawing as well as transfer paper and carbon pencils. Acrylic and tempera paint were incorporated throughout. The sky was created with the use of cotton balls for the clouds, and finally gold foil and ribbon for the sun. The sun has stars on it, because the stars were a symbol of success for the youth. The sun has been a symbol of power, growth, health,



passion and the cycle of life in many cultures and religions throughout time. Some believe it is a representation of the higher self.

Despite the passion the children have to win this competition and be able to continue creating art, they have already won so much more. This mural is a representation of how hard work and effort really does payoff, and that there is always light at the end of the tunnel. Sometimes you might not see the light at first but if you stay on the correct path, you will reach your full potential all in due time. The final quote the children wanted to incorporate is, “You will never see your full potential, until you seek your full potential.” The youth brought me this quote as the final component, thanking me and all of you for allowing them to seek their full potential through creative education like this, where they would have otherwise not opened their minds and hearts towards what they could all accomplish if they realized all they are worth.

Laura Reyes
M.S.W.