

Art for cultural integration through a mural

Pre-Columbian art, Mayans, Incas, Aztecs and Cherokee art

We began by working on the similarities of these cultures. Although they are geographically far from each other, the students were surprised by their many similarities, pertaining to food, religion, and life styles. I thought for a long time on how to work with youth who are moving toward adulthood. I wished for this work to leave a message for them, beyond the artistic achievements, I wanted something more.

It seemed appropriate to work with two Cherokee stories because one is about the passage from childhood to maturity (which we call adolescence) and the other one is about being an adult and taking responsibility for our actions. This story says that we have two wolves internally and we are responsible, as adults, for which one we choose to feed. The story goes that if we wish to be good people, we will feed the wolf of joy, peace, love, hope, sharing, serenity, humility and kindness.

Moving into adulthood these young become responsible for their actions. These stories will help them to think and understand this transitional period in their lives. The focus of this preliminary mural project is the integration of these concepts of childhood, adulthood, rites, dances, customs, good, bad, etc.

For projects of this nature, I initially allow each student to work individually on their own art piece. Later, the mural is created by combining the individual works of each student.

It was not easy task to mix two cultures, but they learned that nothing is impossible. Now they are working on the finishing touches on their personal work, so everything is ready for the exhibition. One can observe in each work differences in taste, criteria and age, but they all reflect the wealth of imagination of all the students.

A short film about this project was created by Joshua Hamilton, who is a senior majoring in film and video at Pellissippi State Community College. This would not have been possible, if not for the free collaboration of the Pellissippi State Community College and its student. I deeply appreciate the possibility to have this first experience of integration through the arts in Knoxville documented, hoping to serve as inspiration for projects to come.

Thus, through this project we are able to think differently and grow through these differences, breaking with stereotypes that cause so much harm to communities and the world. Many thanks to Tennessee Art Commission and Hola Hora Latina for giving me the opportunity to demonstrate once more, this time in Knoxville, that cultural integration through the arts is possible.

Dina R. Ruta,

Project Director