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Mural, Painting and Art Education Project with African Refugees
and the African Community Center of West Michigan

Carrie Schoenborn and Mentor, Jill Eggers
Abstract

In starting the project at the African Community Center, we spent time getting to know the center, the people who use it and how it is used. We began by simply being at the center and helping with whatever needed to be done. We answered phones, met people who came and cleaned the donation closet. Yaka, the director, brought us to visit many of the families that use the center and we talked to both the refugees and Yaka about the experiences these individuals had coming to the United States; the difficulties they faced in Africa, on their journey to the U.S. and continue to face today. We also did research about Africa and the refugee experience. Soon we began teaching ESL and art classes and got to know many of the families quite well. The next step was to use the knowledge we gained of the center to recreate the interior of the center. We hoped to make it more friendly, inviting and useful for all those who use it. We repainted the walls and created interactive maps of Africa and the United States to help individuals have a fun way to learn and talk about where they came from and where they are now. In addition, we rearranged the rooms to create a “kids’ room,” allowing the adults to focus on their classes. The kids’ room was then repainted with a sunset and the silhouette of an African landscape and animals. This allows the kids to talk about Africa and reminds them of where they came from. The silhouette is also painted in chalk paint, encouraging the children to interact with each other by drawing directly on the walls. We documented the entire process through photos and film with the hopes of using these materials to inform others of the center’s vital programs and their importance to the greater Grand Rapids community through the media and other contacts.
The Mural, Painting, and Art Education Project with African Refugees and the African Community Center of Grand Rapids included two separate, but related projects. Mural and painting projects were proposed for both the interior and exterior of the building and, although there was a separate individual leading the exterior project, much of the project was done in partnership. In the original proposal, we would begin by volunteering at the center and teaching art classes in order to become familiar with the center and the individuals who use the center (these individuals are referred to as clients). In addition, we would research the art of Africa, as well as, Africa itself and the experiences of African refugees. Finally, using the knowledge gained through these experiences, I would work on creating a warm, inviting interior and the other artist, Dennis Nagelkirk, would create a mural for the exterior of the building. Although all of the components of the proposal were eventually met, the project became much more than what was first expected.

The first week, we met the director of the African Community Center of Grand Rapids, Yaka Kamungi and all of the board members at the first board meeting of the summer. At the board meeting, it was discovered that the center was going to be going through some big changes. They were beginning to work with a consultant who was supposed to help the center run more efficiently, build infrastructure and in the long run, be more qualified to receive funding. The center had also recently lost its two interns, who live in other parts of the state during the summer and Yaka began taking a full load of summer classes. As a result, Dennis and I immediately jumped into the basic running of the center; from the very first week, we were answering phones, checking emails and helping with the general organization of the center. Yaka brought us to visit the families
that would be the most frequent clients during the summer. We had created forms for each of the families to fill out and sign including permissions slips for kids to ride with volunteers to and from the center, permission to video and photograph clients for center promotions and documentation of the project, and a form with information about the family (names and ages of children) and what classes they would like to attend. Yaka translated information (many of the families spoke Swahili, Kirundi and/or French), describing what each paper was for and introducing our project and us. Yaka also translated any questions that we had for the refugees; we asked a variety of things including how long they have been in the states, what their expectations were upon coming to the U.S. and what challenges they are currently facing in Grand Rapids.

In the refugee camps there is a rumor that as soon as you step off the plane in the United States, you will be given a bag with 3 kilos of money. This demonstrates the major lack of understanding of what will happen when they arrive in the U.S. Before they come to the U.S. they are given a one-week ‘crash course’ in American culture, but no one sufficiently explains to them that they will have to pay for their houses, their plane ticket and everything else. Once in the states they have a month, give or take, until their grant from the government is up and they must start paying their own bills. If, however, anyone in their family finds a job, their funding is dropped immediately. Therefore, the agencies that place these families are mainly concerned with getting them a job quickly because the sooner they can get the families off the government grants, the more ‘successful’ they are considered. If, however, one of these men (or women) loses their job, they have an especially tough time finding a new one because they have never had to ‘search’ for a job before. In the refugee camps, everything is provided to them; housing,
food, and even which job they need to do. They have never been able to choose their job or had to manage their money before. They haven’t ever really had any possessions of their own. Since most of these individuals speak little to no English, even when they do find jobs, they are mostly low paying and are not sufficient to pay for their housing, food and other necessities. As a result, they face many of the same problems as any low-income families in Grand Rapids, but in addition, they don’t speak English, don’t know how to use public transportation and don’t know most of the customs. While many of the men are able to get out of the house to go to work, most of the women need to stay home to take care of the children. The lucky ones know other families close by that they can interact with on a regular basis, but there are many who are living in areas with no other refugee families and no one to talk to. Not surprisingly, many of these individuals fall into a depression.

The African Community Center reaches out to all of these individuals with a variety of services; ESL (English as a Second Language) classes, women’s support groups, translating (esp. bills, medical and insurance forms, etc.), computer skills classes and some basic information classes such as how to eat properly. Most importantly, it provides individuals with someplace to go where they can meet others who have gone through many of the same things they have and provide a place to meet where they can speak their own language, talk about their own customs and discuss problems they are facing.

When we introduced the idea of art classes to the families, it became immediately clear that we would need to include English lessons into the classes. Many said they were interested in art, but they couldn’t afford to spend time going to art classes when
they could be going to English classes instead. This transformed our thinking about the
classes and we began calling them ESL Art classes and discussing the ways in which we
would incorporate English lessons into the art lessons. We began having classes on
Monday, Wednesday, Friday and every other Saturday. The weekday classes were for all
ages and the Saturday classes were just for kids. For the weekday classes, we made up
handouts with the vocabulary words we would be learning that day. Many of the
refugees were a bit awkward drawing at first. They would draw extremely slowly, as if
they were afraid of making a mistake. Part of this was due to their timidness around us
and part of it was due to their lack of experience using pencils. On weekdays, lessons
were very basic. For example, abstract drawing from observation, drawing shapes and
using shapes to make pictures. Many of the adults had
trouble drawing basic shapes, like squares and
triangles. Drawing straight lines at the correct angles
was difficult, as well as making sharp corners.

On Saturdays, we would have art classes just
for kids. Most of the kids speak English pretty well,
therefore we were able to work with some more
complex ideas. For example, one lesson was teaching
them how to make comic strips. We explained word and thought bubbles and creating a
sequence of boxes to tell a story. For another project, we created self-portraits. The
students began by answering questions about themselves and then created portraits that
conveyed some aspect of themselves that they felt was important. We emphasized that
self-portraits didn’t have to be realistic, but rather should tell about the person through
the use of color, patterns, symbols, etc. Many of the lessons were planned both as art lessons and as a way for us to learn more about the students through personal work and storytelling. There was a wide range of skill levels in the class (ages ranged from 3 to 15) so understanding varied and lessons had to be adjusted for various levels of understanding.

ESL classes immediately followed the adult art classes and, since we were lacking teachers, we taught these classes as well. Often the two classes would merge and work back and forth with each other; teaching English during the art classes and teaching art words (colors and shapes) during ESL classes. Teaching classes at the center was a very important aspect of getting to know the families and the necessities of the center. On the first day of ESL classes, we began by getting out a map of the world and asking the students to show us where they were from. The first student said he was from Burundi, but when asked to point to his country on the map, his finger hovered slightly above it, slowly moving back and forth before eventually resting on Canada. This single moment lead to innumerable new questions about our role at the center. Yes, we were there to make the center more inviting for the families, but it also needed to be useful for them as they struggled to both maintain their cultural heritage and fit in their new surroundings. While those in the United States have been around maps all our lives, how often do you see a map in a refugee camp? How does one view oneself in relation to the world when one has never seen a map? How does one view the rest of the world, even with a map in hand, when one doesn’t know how to interpret it in terms of size, shape, and direction?

Another feature of the center that we quickly learned through experience was that the children needed space for themselves that was both safe and fun. The center is quite
small and having the children in the same room as the adults during lessons was not beneficial for either group. Whenever possible, we would bring the children outside to run around and play in the fresh air, but space inside was also necessary.

Although working at the center and interacting with the families was by far the most important and useful tool in determining the changes we would make to the center, we also researched African art, Africa and the refugee experience. Reading What is the What by Dave Eggers was extremely helpful in understanding both the experience of refugees upon arriving in the United States and their experiences in Africa. While many of the conflicts faced in the U.S. were obvious through talking with the clients of the center, it was more difficult to get them to talk to us about what they had experienced in Africa. For this information, we turned to books and documentaries. We also used these sources for information about African art. Considering that many of the clients had spent their entire lives prior to the United States in refugee camps, they knew even less than we did about African art. As we were looking through books and learning about art in Africa, we were also sharing this information with the clients who had lived in Africa.

After spending about three months working at the center and researching Africa, we began to discuss and compile ideas for the transformation of the center. The first step was to paint the sterile, white walls of the main room. Through additional funding, we were able to hire four artists, Teresa Zbiciak, Ruby Miller, Julia Greenway, and Jason Rood, to help with classes, give input on designs and help paint. We threw around ideas for colors, using images from African art books for inspiration and then I created mock-
ups of the center in Photoshop to determine how the colors would work in the center and which walls should be which color. I created the same type of mock-ups for the kids’ room with images of African landscapes and sunsets. I showed the images to Yaka and some other frequent visitors of the center for input, then met with Jill to talk about the images. She suggested that we use at least one color that was a bit lighter in the main room in order to make it feel a little bigger and expressed thoughts about bringing some calmer, cooler colors into the kids’ room because with so many oranges and reds, it may agitate the kids and make the room feel smaller than it already is. I brought up the idea of cutting maps out of wood to hang on the walls and we discussed different options for making them interactive such as using magnetic paint and magnets to encourage learning. After the meeting, I tested some magnetic primers and reworked the colors and layout for the center. About a week later we met again, discussed the new choices and bought materials to get started.

Painting the main space presented a few problems, but we worked through all of them. One ceiling had a lot of water damage that had to be repaired and one wall had paper letters glued to it that had to be scraped off, washed and patched. Another obstacle was the computer tables which were screwed into the wall. Upon removing them, one revealed a hole the size of baseball that had to be patched. When all was patched and painted, the tables were replaced and we were ready to hang the maps.

The maps are about 4 feet by 6 feet and needed to be cut out with a jigsaw. I traced a projection of the maps onto a piece of paper, cut it out, taped it to the wood and
Ruby, who had experience with the jigsaw, cut them out. I used magnetic primer to create a surface that would attract magnets and painted the color over it. I was having a tough time deciding what colors to use that would allow the maps to fit in with the other colors in the room so I incorporated the colors from the walls into the map and then added some other colors that I had found in African art books. When we attempted to hang the maps, we quickly discovered that the hangers we had originally planned to hang the maps with weren’t strong enough so we had to screw the maps directly into the wall. Upon finishing the maps, I cut magnets into the shapes of the states and countries for the kids and adults from the center to decorate.

After reworking the image for the kids’ room, it was time to begin painting. We had settled on a silhouette of an African landscape with African animals so to start I drew the outline of the animals and the tree. Having taped off the walls, I began to paint the sunset scene, adjusting the colors as I worked. Next, I filled in the silhouettes of the animals and tree with chalkboard paint. After some touch-ups and adjustments, we took off all the tape and cleaned the center. Many of the clients were able to see the final look at the big end of the summer event, the Walk for Congolese Women. The kids loved decorating the magnets and drawing on the walls and the adults all commented on the colors. It was a lot of work, but it was very rewarding to see the families enjoying the center.

We found a new ESL teacher to take over classes and began to transition out of working at the center. Yaka has applied for some grants that would allow him to hire a
few interns to take over what we had been doing and I will continue to have art workshops for the kids every other Saturday.
Student Art Classes

Self-portraits

Comic Strips

African Animals
Before

The Final Look

The Main Room
The Final Look

The Kids’ Room
Reference