

Students proud of geese

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Portage la Prairie, MB - The city will soon have a gaggle of geese that stay here year-round.

And they'll be made of copper.

As part of the ArtsSmarts program in Portage la Prairie, the copper geese will be installed permanently in the PCU Centre's main hall, ArtsSmarts chairwoman Yvette Cuthbert announced during the opening of the program's annual exhibition at the Portage and District Arts Centre Thursday.



Staff photos by Rob Swystun Siblings Aidan and Maggie Muirhead, 8 and 10 respectively, trace the designs on one of the copper geese that will make up a permanent installation in the PCU Centre at the opening of the annual ArtsSmarts exhibition at the Portage and District Arts Centre Thursday. At right, are puppets made by students at Fort la Reine School, which are also on display at the arts centre.

"When the installation is complete, we will see 18 copper geese flying in formation high above our heads in the atrium of the PCU multiplex, just like we see so often in the spring and especially in the fall over Crescent Lake," Cuthbert said during a speech at the exhibit opening.

Students from all the city's schools, plus Oakville School and Brennan Hutterian School, designed the etchings that adorn the underside of the geese's wings, Cuthbert explained.

As per ArtsSmarts' mandate, professional artists, including Sandi Storen, Suzy Laevens, Gabriele Neuschwander and Leta Owens, helped students with the projects.

"Each classroom picked a theme relating to a subject they were already studying in school," the chairwoman said.

The classrooms researched their themes and chose images that best suited that theme.

"Each goose will be unique, just as we all are, and together they will be an amazing sight," she added.

Students drew the designs, on paper and the artists transferred the designs onto the flat copper cutout of the goose with a black marker, Cuthbert told the crowd of about 50 people. Then, any portion of the goose that is to remain shiny would be taped off.

From there, the geese are dipped into an acid bath, which adheres the marker to the copper as etchings. The portions of the geese that are taped off remain unaffected by the acid.

After that, Cuthbert continued, the flat copper cutouts are bent into the shape of flying geese. They will be hung in the PCU Centre permanently in June.

Two of the students who helped decorate the geese were siblings Maggie and Aidan Muirhead, who attended the exhibit opening.

Maggie's Grade 5 Ecole Arthur Meighen School class decided the theme for their goose would be aboriginal art.

The 10 year old said her teacher researched aboriginal artwork, and they decided as a class what they wanted on their goose.

"It was fun, but sometimes tough," she said of the project.

Her brother Aidan, 8, had similar sentiments.

"We had to draw our pictures five times until they were good," he said.

The Ecole Crescentview School student's Grade 3 class chose the four seasons as the theme for their goose. "I drew a goalie," he added. Over on the other side of the Portage and District Arts Centre gallery, Neuschwander, a local potter, was busy transferring the students' designs onto the copper cutouts, as Cuthbert had described in her speech.

While the professional artists play a big part in the projects, it's very much the students' art, Neuschwander noted.

"The students are the brain of the project," she said. "They are coming up with the themes and the artwork."

But ArtsSmarts goes beyond just students and artists, Cuthbert noted in her speech.

She pointed to Brent Froese, a Portage Collegiate Institute shop teacher, who was instrumental in cutting the copper in the goose shape and figuring out a way to reinforce the structure.

He also improved on designs given to him for about 800 smaller geese, Cuthbert said.

These smaller geese will be available to classes that visit the installation to decorate. They, too, will find a home in the PCU Centre.

Cuthbert also noted she and Community Foundation of Portage and District (CFPD) executive director Karen Braden will be the ones to put the copper geese cutouts into the acid bath to adhere the artwork to the wings.

OTHER PROJECTS

While a lot of the talk at the exhibit opening was about geese, plenty of other projects were on display, including puppets and masks from Fort la Reine School, done with the help of artist Jane MacDonald; fused glass masks from La Verendrye School, made with the help of Owens; Portage Collegiate Institute's documentary project created with videographer William Plenty; and watercolour paintings done by Brennan School, with the help of artist Linda Picard.



La Verendrye Grade 3 teacher Paula Mellen said her students had a lot of fun creating the fused glass masks. The four masks represented the cultural diversity found within her classroom.

"We have quite a diverse class," she said.

She has students with cultural backgrounds including Thai, Chinese and Nigerian, the teacher said, and found symbols that would represent these countries well, along with a symbol to represent Canada.

The ArtsSmarts program depends on funding, and Cuthbert thanked all the participating funding organizations during her speech.

Back when the project started about 11 years ago, it was the McConnell Family Foundation that funded ArtsSmarts in this city for nine years with more than \$ 500,000.

Since then, the Portage School Division has committed to a five-year contribution of \$ 20,000, the (CFPD) has continued its commitment of \$ 2,500 per year over five years and the Royal Bank in Portage has sponsored the annual exhibit over the past five years for a total of \$ 12,500.

This would mark the last year that Royal Bank will sponsor the exhibit, Cuthbert noted.

Jamor Farms also contribute regularly, she pointed out, along with several individuals, including Sandra and Dave Falk, who have a multi-year commitment of \$ 2,000 per year.

Cuthbert received donations from RBC Financial and Royal Bank manager Guy Moffat for \$ 2,500, CFPD director Sandra Faulk for \$ 2,500 and a cheque for \$ 362 from the John Rennie Memorial Fund, which is distributed by the CFPD, presented by Rennie's widow Sharon Rennie.

See many more ArtsSmarts photos at www.thedailygraphic.com.