

I Need to Tell You About Raymond... The True Story of a True Artist

MS 223 in the South Bronx designated two weeks in February where they concentrated on a special project. The subjects to choose from included science, nutrition and art. And physical well-being. Since the art project was not being led by an art teacher, I was invited to share my expertise. It's an experience I won't soon forget.

First, Ms. Rao and Mr. Kyle took the students on field trips to the Metropolitan Museum of Art in Manhattan and the Welling Court Murals in Queens. They were exposed to extraordinary art and experienced the visual power of murals. Following their trips, they began designing their own "mural with a message" choosing a topic they deeply cared about. It was at this point I was invited to come in.

The students viewed images of my art from age 13 to the present. I felt it was important for them to see that at the beginning, it was not very different than theirs. Then, by practicing and attending art college, I vastly improved. I went on to explain the art process when starting a mural. They saw the many steps it took going from a page-sized drawing to a wall-sized piece of art. Researching subject matter included books, the internet and most important, being a keen observer of the world around them.

Next, I explained how I used a gridding technique to enlarge my drawing. I showed works-in-progress as well as the type of paints and brushes I use.

Armed with all of this information and inspiration, the students tackled their assignment. I spoke individually with each student as they freely conveyed their ideas verbally and on paper. All were very forthcoming and I was impressed by many compelling concepts. Toward the end of the session, Ms. Rao pointed out the one student I missed who had come in late. When I saw Raymond's image, I immediately envisioned the great possibilities it possessed as a group project. He did not need any prompting from me; he knew exactly what he wanted to do and he did so beautifully. When I saw his detailed drawing, I asked about his knowledge of the saxophone. He confirmed by nodding that he played the instrument in school. Unlike his classmates, he was quite reticent to respond in any other way. I merely chalked it up to the fact that many artists are introverts preferring to have their art speak for them.

I left at lunchtime and that afternoon, the teachers oversaw the finishing and coloring of the designs. Afterward, they voted on one mural to work on together. I left, wondering if Raymond's sketch would be chosen.

The next day, I happily discovered, Raymond's art garnered the most votes! I came in wearing spattered clothes so they could see that washing them did not take the paint off, ever! I felt I owed that to their parents so the students would take care not to stain their uniforms. I brought in a few choice colors to supplement the school's primary ones of red, yellow and blue plus black and white. Sea foam green, cyan blue, raspberry red and deep purple were all hues hard to achieve by mixing the basics. The end result would be a more vibrant painting.

While the other students pieced together the 12 inch canvases, I took Raymond aside to mix the paints. It was at that time I witnessed a marked difference in his demeanor. He voiced definite opinions on what he envisioned for his mural, pointing out areas of his sketch where he attempted gradation of a color. "See, I used this lighter blue here," he directed me. We worked together mixing colors to his satisfaction. He seemed to hang onto my every word. He eagerly stirred the paint while I gave him a quick lesson on using complementary colors to shade an object.

When it came to mixing the skin tone, I suggested making it a deeper color since it was very close to the color of the sax in his sketch. "Why not make it your color?" He readily agreed. "When it comes skin colors," I explained, "they all start with the same three. You begin with red and yellow then add blue to deepen the color." We matched the result to his forearm.

Other students joined in the mixing of the background colors. What happened next was unexpected and deeply saddening for me. Raymond was called down to the office where his mother was waiting to take him to the dentist. Our mural designer was going to miss the painting of his creation!

The rest of us went to work with a great sense of cooperation. Not only were they very respectful of me, they shared the paint and brushes without any disagreements. They listened to instruction on technique and they followed it to the best of their ability. When constructive criticism was given, no one ridiculed anyone. I was truly impressed.

At one point as they were diligently painting around the perimeter of the mural, one student started singing. Immediately, several others joined in. Another asked, "Why are you singing?"

I jumped in, "I think it's a great idea, especially while we are painting a musical instrument!" They all agreed and the music became even more joyful.

It took three intense hours to complete. I was hoping that Raymond would return before we finished but it was not to be. When I suggested we take a group photo, I still couldn't believe that he missed the whole process. Then I had a thought. "Ms Rao", I asked, "Would you please take a picture of Raymond and send it to me? I will use photoshop and include him in the group."



And so I did. Ms. Rao also sent a photo of Raymond painting when he returned to school. There were only minor touch-ups left but it served the purpose of connecting him to his art. It made me so happy to see. On Friday, the students unveiled their masterpiece to the school. They were showered with praise!

The following week on career day, I was invited back to speak to other sixth graders about my job as a commercial artist. I wanted to say hello to Raymond and congratulate him. Ms. Rao and vice principal Lincoln brought me to his classroom. Once again, I was disappointed. The vice principal went to his office and called his mother. "He's home with strep throat," he reported. "All of his siblings are sick," I would miss him once again.

"Could you set up a skype session so that I could speak with him some time?" I asked Ms. Rao.

"Absolutely", she assured me. It was at this point I learned of Raymond's classification as a special needs student. "He's always on the fringe, never quite keeping up," she elaborated. "We can only hope that his art and music accomplishments will make an impression on his parents."

"Yes," I agreed. "If only more people recognized the benefits of art education. The increased self esteem it brings to someone like Raymond is immeasurable, no matter what career he may choose."

For the next three weeks, Ms. Rao repeatedly attempted to set up the Skype session. Unfortunately, every time she tried, Raymond was not in the building. I can only imagine the challenges his mother faced daily. Making sure all of her children attended school was obviously one of them. "Did she get to see his mural?" I asked hopefully.

"No, not yet", she replied sadly.

As I left the school, I came across a bulletin board with a page from the book the students created as part of the mural project. They interviewed each other and they each told of their own mural's message. I was anxious to find out about Raymond and what he had to

say. I wondered how descriptive he would be since he offered so little on that first day. What I read moved me deeply. That's why I needed to tell you about Raymond, the true story of a true artist...

Raymond Reyes

Raymond Reyes started drawing when he was 5 years old. Raymond says that he enjoys art a lot and that he has skill in drawing. He also says that when he draws it comes out pretty good. Raymond says that he joined this program to become a better artist.

His favorite part of Murals With a Message was sketching and going to Welling Court in Queens. He loves all art work because they are great pieces of art. He can't decide what



art piece is his favorite because he likes them all. He was born in the Bronx and his parents are from Puerto Rico.

The Wall of Music

This mural shows a man who is performing and when he does, colors and musical notes come out of his instrument--a saxophone. I want people to notice how the background is in very bright colors.

My inspiration for this

mural was my love of music. I play cello, saxophone, and guitar. I have been into art for a long time. For example, I created three other paintings. The first painting was about my culture and country, Puerto Rico.

The message here is that the people with problems in their life have a non-colorful life while music is colorful. If we add music to their non-colorful life, their life would be more colorful, making it more beautiful and happy.



Author's Note:

It was quite an ambitious task to complete the mural and I give major Kudos to the teachers, Ms. Rao and Mr. Kyle. They described how difficult it was to coordinate the field trips along with the other project components. The students took pictures and shot videos over the course of the two weeks and created a movie. They put together a large book with all of the student's mural designs, student interviews and their mural's message in their own words. Despite the massive undertaking, the teachers were convinced that the benefit to the students vastly outweighed the amount of work. If only all teachers had their dedication and creative thinking!

I am still waiting for my skype session with Raymond. I don't know exactly what I am going to say but I feel a strong need to connect. I don't expect him to say much but that doesn't matter. Now that I have read his words and know his mural's message, he doesn't have to say anything at all. After all, his art speaks for itself.

“Art makes Life Worth Loving”

Betsy Franco Feeney