Youth Art Exhibition at the United Nations: Images of Identity, Home, and Cultural Exchange

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The AATA warmly congratulates Eileen P. McGann, ATR-BC, LCAT, Director and founder of the Arts and Creative Therapies program at MercyFirst, one of New York’s leading non-profit human service agencies, for her work coordinating a recent youth art exhibition, “Hope Holds No Borders: Children's Art of Compassion and Inclusion” at the United Nations. Ms. McGann formerly served on the Editorial Board of Art Therapy: Journal of the American Art Therapy Association and has a broad range of clinical experience concentrated in therapeutic milieu and studio approach with young people who have experienced complex and chronic trauma, including refugee children, adult survivors, and women veterans. The exhibition displayed works from two projects: “About Me” and “Hope Holds No Borders.” The artwork was created by children who are migrants, refugees, and/or U.S. citizens through art therapy programs at MercyFirst and Project Lift, of the Maya Foundation, in Istanbul, Turkey.

The exhibition, supported by the U.N. TOGETHER campaign and Permanent Mission of Mexico and Switzerland, was displayed at the United Nations from June 12-16. Many of the young artists were able to attend the reception on June 13, which attracted over sixty guests, including speakers from the United Nations:

Maher Nasser, Acting Under-Secretary-General for Global Communications, Department of Public Information (DPI); Damian Cardona Onses, Acting Chief Communications Campaigns, DPI; and Distinguished Delegate Fernando de la Mora, Permanent Mission of Mexico. MercyFirst staff, friends, and youth were also joined by Stefania Piffanelli and Andrea Boza of the TOGETHER Campaign, United Nations representatives from Mexico, Brazil, and Grenada, and the Sisters of Mercy.

“About Me”

Since 2012, young people at MercyFirst, a residential treatment facility in New York, have engaged in the arts to explore the meaning of identity, home, community and social justice. The
young residents come from diverse backgrounds and life experiences with multinational and multi-ethnic representation, including individuals born in the US, migrants, and refugees. Through the “About Me” project, McGann invited these young people to create images that would tell others something about themselves; it may be a self-portrait or a meaningful event in their lives. The collection’s description states: “Seen in a collective group the works reveal diversity and experiences created by youth who are migrants, refugees, and U.S. citizens residing at MercyFirst.”

Left: The dark images displayed here reflect life’s struggle, traumatic exposure as well as courage and resilience.

Artist statement (top left): “This is the national bird of my country. The bird is very sad; she cannot walk any longer because she is wounded. Sometimes adversity or certain circumstances in our lives make you feel sad and there is not a desire to continue it is possible to keep going.”

Right: A shared love of being outside and a connection to the environment is seen in images of colorful, vibrant landscapes.

Artist statement (lower): “I like this landscape because all of my life I have been there. I like it because you can feel the freedom, the field is beautiful and I love the colors of the animals. I would love you to see this place. I hope you can visit here one day.”

“Hope Holds No Borders”

This art exchange was a collaboration between art therapists, Eileen McGann and Leyla Akca of the Maya Foundation, an organization working with refugee children to reveal the implicit bonds of humanity through images. Both Mercy First and Project Lift offer art therapy services to address trauma experienced by the loss of home, migration, seeking asylum as a refugee, and life experiences. The two art therapy programs invited children to create images that would convey a message of “understanding, support, or friendship” to send across the world to each other. Ms. McGann describes the purpose of the exchange exhibition: “The arts are being used as a catalyst to
unite diverse people, reduce perceptions of bias, and build relationships that are inclusive. The focus of these artistic endeavors is to unify people in awareness and increase tolerance, acceptance, and affirmation of each other.”

The art projects have united the youth on MercyFirst’s campus and reached out to other migrant, host, and refugee children at Project Lift.

Want to experience the exhibition for yourself? Watch a short video of speakers from the United Nations reception and another video, “Kids Helping Kids,” by the youth at Mercy First about the art exchange between themselves (on-campus youth include US-born, migrant, and unaccompanied minors from Central America) and Syrian refugee children in Istanbul.