

Painting mural gives Augusta youth inmates hope

By Lynn Davidson

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Hope walked in the door recently for the more than 100 youths at the Augusta Youth Development Campus.

Emanuel Martinez, one of the most successful Hispanic artists in the United States, spent several weeks on the campus helping 20 inmates paint a large mural in the gym.

More than 80 Department of Juvenile Justice officials and staff attended a special unveiling ceremony Oct. 19.

“When I came in, these young men were just itching to show what they did,” DJJ Deputy Commissioner Richard Harrison said. “I think art provides a message to the participant as well as to those who see it. And this work provides a message of hope and possibility.”

The painting was sponsored by the Emanuel Project Art for Kids, funded by Louisa Craft-Jornayvaz, which is taking place at youth detention centers in eight states. Augusta’s mural was the fifth to be completed in Georgia.

An award-winning artist who paints U.S. Cabinet members, creates large civic sculptures and has three works on permanent exhibit in the Smithsonian’s Museum of American Art, Martinez himself was incarcerated more than once as a teenager in Colorado. While serving time in solitary confinement, Martinez would soothe his troubled feelings by drawing on paper towels with the burnt end of matchsticks. A nurse discovered his drawings hidden inside his shirt and gave him the opportunity to participate in artistic endeavors, eventually earning Martinez a scholarship to college.

Martinez designs the murals at each juvenile facility, customizing it for that center using suggestions from the staff. The incarcerated youths do 80 percent of the painting under Martinez’s tutelage.

“Every time we messed up, he would show us how we messed up, and then he left us alone to fix it,” Zacarias Santana said at Augusta’s YDC. “I wanted to be a tattoo artist. But since I did this, I want to keep painting and become a muralist. I feel like I can do something in life now. I never really thought I could before.”

Augusta YDC Principal Audrey Armistad said each participant had to earn the right to work on the project and had to “stay out of trouble” the entire time. Only a few worked with Martinez at any one time, giving him an opportunity to bond with them as they painted.

“Mr. Martinez helped me realize I can achieve my goals and can respect myself and respect others,” Jodarian Woods said. “Most of us never had that father-son talk that Mr. Martinez gave us.”

Titled *Visualize Your Future*, the 12-foot-high, 68-foot-wide mural features three predominant head shots of young men wearing graduation caps with tassels. Symbols of various career choices surround each portrait, including education, computer technology, horticulture, visual and performance arts, construction and architecture, and sports.

Martinez pointed out that one of the graduates in the mural was distracted by a butterfly.

“That was inspired by one of the kids who showed me some butterflies he drew. I was so impressed with them that I told him to do one on the wall,” Martinez said. “It represents rebirth.”

When Martinez asked audience members to join him in giving the young men a hand for the job well-done, they gave a standing ovation.

“This message is not just for you today, but it’s for anybody that walks in this building for years to come,” Harrison said to them. “There’s no reason any of you can’t achieve what you want to do.”

Facility Director John Brady said the project was so successful, he wants to expand it and let the youths paint more murals in other areas of the campus. Armistad said art is being incorporated into the curriculum in all subjects at YDC.

“Art is a less defensive mode of self-expression,” she said. “It allows the student to get centered and focused. It allows the teacher to use art supplies to teach math and social studies. It allows them to integrate the left and right sides of the brain.”



Special
Augusta Youth Detention Campus inmates pose in front of a mural they painted with nationally known artist Emanuel Martinez.