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North Charleston High School student artwork displayed on area billboards

BY ADAM PARKER APARKER@POSTANDCOURIER.COM

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Fatima Cuevas won first place in the billboard art contest arranged by Adams Outdoor Advertising and North Charleston Hi District/Provided

Last year, a local billboard company reached out to North Charleston High School art teacher Jennifer Connell with an idea: 12 billboards would be made available for a public showcase of student artworks.

Images would be displayed on digital and traditional billboards in Charleston and North Charleston. Connell would initiate a contest resulting in four winners and an honorable mention. The work of each winner would be mounted on three

traditional billboards, and included in digital rotations.

The art would be on view for two months, after which the vinyl billboards would be rolled up and given to the students.

The project, which was unveiled in May and recently concluded, was a big hit.

The contest was judged by local artist Gail Robertson, with input coming from the teachers at North Charleston High School and the creative team at Adams Outdoor Advertising. Fatima Cuevas won first place for her creative portrait of activist and educator Angela Davis. Damian Mackley won second place for his mountain landscape called “The Mind State.”

Charisma Murray won third place for her painting of a baby-blue eye called “Lashes.” Jasmine Parrott won fourth place for her portrait of Malcolm X. Kerchief Reed received an honorable mention for his submission, “Blue Heart.”

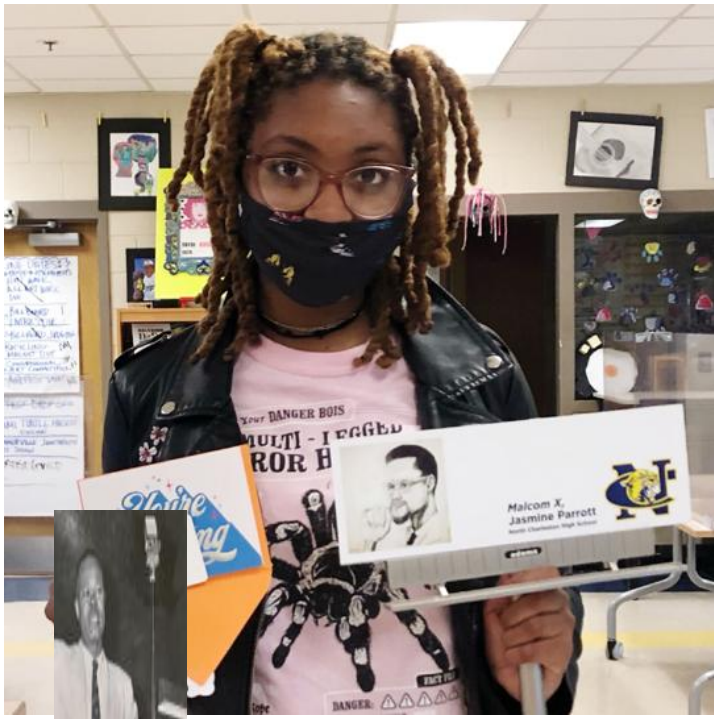
This was a special kind of public promotion (valued at around \$35,000) that Adams Outdoor Advertising likes to do occasionally.

“When we do public service projects, one thing that hits close to home to us is education,” General Manager Ben Armitage said. So local schools are always on the radar, and North Charleston High School in particular, which is around the corner from Adams’ offices. “We like to be involved in things that make an impact locally.”

The project was the brainchild of Administrative Coordinator Lyn Turner. She thought: “It would be cool to have an art contest and put student art on billboards. ... It would be a lot of fun, get recognition for the students, and show everyone what talent is there (at the school).”

Turner emailed the art teachers, connected with Connell, and got the ball rolling.

Connell said the project was first proposed in the fall of 2020, but logistical challenges posed by the pandemic caused her to suggest pushing the billboard initiative to the spring term. She was thrilled that Principal Henry Darby showed



Jasmine Parrott won fourth place for her portrait of Malcolm X. Courtesy of Allen University School District/Provided



his support during a period when schools were necessarily focused on managing the pandemic and coping with related restrictions.

As the competitive nature of the enterprise ramped up, so did student engagement, she said.

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BY ADAM PARKER APARKER@POSTANDCOURIER.COM

The project was integrated into Connell's lesson plans, and students in all three sections of her class participated. Some worked in the classroom, others at home. And art supplies were limited, so students reached for what they could find.

"Some students were using makeup, food coloring or fingernail polish," Connell said. "It was so exciting that they were so innovative and creative."

The students had a choice of mediums: digital formats, collage and cutouts, pencil, pastel, printmaking and more.

"It was diverse," Connell said. "I wanted them to explore different opportunities and express themselves."

Damian Mackley, 16, submitted his landscape for evaluation. He said art is a way for him to convey his emotions, and the mountain scene is one that gives him comfort.

"I see it as a happy place I go to in my dreams," he said.

He made it on a computer using a mousepad and a finger. The first attempt was pointillistic, but Connell thought he could do better, Damian said. So he went back to the drawing board and tried again with lines and shading and color.

“I thought it was a really great opportunity to get my artwork out there, and kind of step outside my comfort zone to see what I could do, and what I could accomplish,” Damian said.

Once he knew the images were mounted on the billboards, he and his mom Nicole Mackley drove around to find them. One was located on Spruill Avenue.

“When I first saw it, my heart dropped, and I was so excited,” he said.

Nicole Mackley pulled over to take pictures.



Damian Mackley won second place in the contest for his mountain landscape called “The Mind State.” Charleston County School District/Provided



COVID-19

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“I’m so proud of him,” she said of her son’s success in the project. “I’m still in awe of it. It’s surreal.”

Armitage, of Adams Outdoor Advertising, said his company would consider partnering with North Charleston High School again — and potentially with other schools.

“It’s another reason to think good things about North Charleston High School,” he said, noting the improvements made in recent years under Darby’s leadership.

Putting art on billboards is a great way to publicize the school’s accomplishments, Armitage said.



LOCAL AND STATE NEWS

Why a pair of old Charleston smokestacks are more than just smokestacks

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Adam Parker has covered many beats and topics for The Post and Courier, including race and history, religion, and the arts. He is the author of “Outside Agitator: The Civil Rights Struggle of Cleveland Sellers Jr.,” published by Hub City Press.