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St. Croix One of Two Locations in U.S. to Install Artwork on Public School Campuses as Part of National Public Art For Schools Program, D.O.E. Says

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Mural art at the St. Croix Educational Complex campus. By. REEMY-REEMZ PHOTOGRAPHY/VICONSORTIUM

The V.I. Dept. of Education said Monday that St. Croix is one of only two locations in the U.S. — the other being New York City — to install artwork on public school campuses as part of the national Public Art for Public Schools program.

The vibrant mural art can be found on the campus of the St. Croix Educational Complex High School and was installed during a one-and-a-half-week period from March 28-April 8. The project was made possible through funding by the St. Croix Foundation for Community Development in

collaboration with Clean Sweep Frederiksted Community Development Corporation. A total of six artists from St. Croix, Puerto Rico, and the U.S. mainland were tapped for the project, with paintings that depicted themes of science and mathematics, cultural pride, resiliency, technology, history, and environmental stewardship, D.O.E. said.

The school hosted an open house on April 8, welcoming the community to the campus to view the art.

“One of the things we wanted to do is really work on the culture of the school and we wanted to begin with the physical building,” Principal Rodney Moorehead said. “The Department helped us out by beginning the process of painting the school and then teacher, Linda James, and the Science Department, wrote this grant to help us beautify the campus.”

Moorehead went on to explain that the school commissioned a very specific type of artwork.

“We didn’t want any type of art; we wanted artwork that really meant something,” he said. “Something that students could look at more than once, and every time they see it, they could see a different component of it. We really wanted to do something for our students to make them proud and happy to come to school.”

Moorehead further pointed out that the initiative was grounded in a focus on STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics) and Social Emotional Learning (SEL), which is, according to the Committee for Children website, “the process of developing the self-awareness, self-control, and interpersonal skills that are vital for school, work, and life success. People with strong social-emotional skills are better able to cope with everyday challenges and benefit academically, professionally, and socially.”

“We know that students sometimes have difficulties at home, and we want when they come to school, they feel like they’re in a different environment, focused on learning, through positivity while being inspired,” Moorehead continued. “It was great to see students looking at the artists, forming circles, and asking questions. Our Science National Honor Society students participated in the process by sharing what they wanted to see in the drawings and preparations, and many assisted with the paintings. Students now have ownership in the project, so we know they will take care of it and take pride in it.”

Nicole Girard, assistant principal, said she noticed an immediate impact the artwork had on students and staff.

“We know the artwork is having a positive effect on students’ social-emotional wellness because we’re seeing the students gather around the art pieces throughout the day, having conversations about it, and just enjoying the experience,” she said. “Even for faculty and staff, I sometimes come here and just look up at the Valerie Thomas mural, and it relaxes and centers me. Many school staff feel this way.”

Girard also said students are taking greater pride in the areas of the campus where the art has been installed, being careful not to damage the artwork.

“Some students have now expressed their interest in becoming artists,” she said. “The project has brought an awareness on so many levels; however, we also want them to learn something from the artwork, with the different symbols, mathematic equations, and Science references incorporated into the designs.”

Virginia Clairmont, founder, president, and CEO of Clean Sweep Frederiksted, praised the project.

“Art shows that you care, it invigorates the spirit, it makes the space that you’re in feel nice and when you feel nice in the space that you live, you do better,” she said. “Art has an anti-litter effect.”

She explained that artists selected for the project was a careful process.

“We were very deliberate in the types of artists we brought in,” she said. “We know we wanted people of color to represent the students, so I put out a call for artists between the Virgin Islands and Puerto Rico, and we chose two from Puerto Rico. When we did our interviews with them, they were speaking the language we were speaking, and they got why this was important for us because we’re reclaiming our spaces.” Other artists were selected through referral and online research. The visiting artists included Yuzly Mathurin of Los Angeles, Felix Omar Cruz Lopez of Puerto Rico, Fabian Williams of Atlanta, C. Flux Sing of Atlanta, Rachel Smith Sepulveda of Puerto Rico, and Jena Fuentes of Lew Muckle Elementary School.

According to D.O.E., the murals are a permanent installment on the Complex campus. Members of the community wishing to view the artwork should contact the school at (340) 778-2036.