

Student art welcomes visitors to World Rowing Championships

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SARASOTA COUNTY — Before Madeleine Harwell started sketches for her “Adopt-A-Country” painting, she did some research.

“Benin is an African country in that dip between Nigeria and Togo,” the Sarasota Middle School student said. “I read somewhere that they’re known for their fabrics.”

Harwell, 13, came up with some patterns and designs. Then she looked up the flag for Benin, which has green, red and yellow rectangles.

“That’s how I got the shape,” she said, “and the colors in the background.”

The final step was adding a boat to represent Benin visiting Sarasota County this week for the 2017 World Rowing Championships.

“I wanted it to stand out,” she said. “I used yellow because the boat doesn’t touch that part of the flag.”

Harwell’s painting — now a 12-by-16-foot banner — is one of 59 works of art that greet visitors to Nathan Benderson Park. The colorful panels line the sidewalks that lead fans to the rowing venue.

People like the paintings. So do the rowers.

“It’s a way to welcome teams from all over the world,” said Angela Hartvigsen, a fine arts specialist for Sarasota County Public Schools. “Many of the teams have shown interest in taking murals back to their training facilities.”

Embrace Our Differences

The student project at Nathan Benderson Park was organized by Embracing Our Differences, a Sarasota non-profit that uses art and education to celebrate diversity.

More than 6,000 students from local schools are visiting the rowing venue this week on field trips that combine art, sport and international studies.

Michael Shelton, executive director of Embracing Our Differences, worked with Manatee County-based Benderson Development Co. and its president on the project.

“Randy Benderson — it was his vision that made this project happen,” Shelton said. “He’s been a longtime supporter of the EOD.”

Shelton has welcomed school groups to Benderson Park with his dog, Thor — a little Maltese who is as a mascot for Embracing Our Differences.

Some of the “Adopt-A-Team” paintings are simple works by elementary school students. Others are elaborate images by groups of high school artists.

The panels are set in a curve along a lake. Different countries, different colors, different styles. Welcome to the World Rowing Championships.

“You can’t miss it,” Shelton said. “People stop, they look, they ask questions.”

Made in the shade

When Hartvigsen leads school groups, she tries to keep them out of the sun and heat.

“Come over in the shade,” she tells them. “You’ll be much happier.”

Students pose for pictures in front of panels created by their classmates. Early deadlines meant many of them were painted during the previous school year.

Jennifer Furry, an 11-year-old student at Heron Creek Middle School in North Port, couldn’t recall which Eastern European country she had painted.

“That was, like, a year ago,” she said, laughing. “I can’t remember.”

Then one of the teachers pointed out her panel. “Oh, there it is.” The country was Romania.

Furry painted a black-and-white boat against a blue background. Waves in the water looked like curving oar strokes.

“I’ve never seen rowing before,” she said. “That’s the symbol for how they paddle the boat.”