



Food for the Body, and the Soul

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Willie Madison sits at a round table covered by newspaper with a box of oil pastels next to him. He draws an abstract of bright pink and equally vibrant green rectangles. He smooths out the streaks of chalky color with his fingertips.

At another table, Richard Lawe{acute}rence wets his paintbrush with watercolors -- brown, green and yellow -- and dabs at a thick piece of paper. His picture of a wide tree trunk grows branches over the course of an hour, and lush grass fills in around the base.

These are two of the seven people who gathered for an art workshop early Monday after eating at Miriam's Kitchen, a breakfast program for the homeless located in the basement of Western Presbyterian Church in Foggy Bottom. About 150 people eat there weekdays, and every Monday a handful may stay for the workshop. An exhibit of their artwork goes on display this week at Howard University's Blackburn Center Gallery.

The show, "Different Strokes: Art From the Streets," which includes art and poetry by the homeless as well as D.C. area students, is designed to bring visibility to some of those who've become invisible.

Finding gallery space for the show wasn't easy, since the low-priced artwork would not generate much revenue, says Ruth Dickey, executive director of Miriam's Kitchen. The show ended up at Howard because of Roberta McLeod, director of the university's Blackburn student union and conference center, who was quick to schedule the exhibit.

"I think homelessness is an American issue which can impact any one of us," McLeod says. "Each one of us is only one paycheck -- and if we're lucky, two paychecks -- away from being homeless. This exhibit will put a human face on people on the streets."

Madison has been eating at Miriam's for about a year and started attending the art workshops in the fall. "I did not think I was artistic at all, but then I realized you don't have to be a great artist," he says. "I can take myself away from the daily stress and make myself useful."

For Madison, it's about creating a mood. "This is a pretty happy mood for me -- a festive

mood," he says of his pink and green rectangles.

Miriam's volunteer Sylvia Van Voorthuizen, who majored in art therapy at George Mason University, began the workshops in 1994. She brings in jazz and classical music to play ("It quiets the mind down") and has a standard request for newcomers: "Draw something from yourself. A tree should be on the paper. Think of a happy memory."

Most people can draw some kind of tree, she says, and it's a good way to gauge their skills.

Victor Sanchez decided to paint his face right into the trunk of a tree in "Tree Spirit," which is featured in the exhibit of mostly landscapes, portraits and abstracts.

Eugene Talbert has been attending the workshops every week for years. He often sketches in pencil, meticulously creating extensive details. In the exhibit, "The Beginning of Alphabets II" features a penciled mountain landscape with a sky full of letters instead of stars.

Talbert had never explored his artistic side before attending the workshops. "I just kept coming and I discovered myself," he says. "If nobody [wants] to listen to you, you can put it on paper."

In addition to promoting art by the homeless (and the formerly homeless), the show marks the culmination of a special school program. A group of local Americorps volunteers conducted workshops about homelessness in three Washington schools. The students wrote poems about the artwork and painted murals about the issue. Some of their poems will hang next to the artwork that inspired them. Three student murals will also be on display, along with one by the Americorps volunteers and one by the homeless artists. Together, the five components, organizers say, are meant to form a mandala, a circle of "wholeness and healing."

An anthology of poetry from the Miriam's Kitchen workshop will also be on sale at the gallery.

Larry Mitchell contributed to the collection. He's been living on the streets for seven years, attending the writing workshops for three.

"Poetry helped me to be able to talk to people -- to be able to reach out," he says. "To reach every soul, every heart and every mind -- that's what I'm about."

At Monday's art workshop, Talbert sat at a table off in a corner working on another sketch. He drew someone fishing near a tree where an artist stood at an easel. He says the artistic process is like a spiritual trance.

"I just love this. I have peace and quiet. It keeps my mind functioning," he says. "It's amazing that this comes out of my head."

Different Strokes: Art From the Streets, at Howard University's Blackburn Center Gallery, 2397 Sixth St. NW, May 19-June 9. Monday-Saturday, 9 a.m.-9:30 p.m.; Sunday, 12-7

p.m. Opening reception Saturday, 5 p.m. Call 202-806-5690 on weekdays; 202-806-5983 after 6 p.m., weekends.