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Art project benefits New Orleans and breathes new life into teacher's creative soul

As an art teacher and artist, Paul Kulikowski has produced art in a wide variety of media, but none will likely have the social or emotional impact as the images he created in New Orleans this summer.

No stranger to New Orleans, the Henry James Memorial School teacher has visited the city many times. This trip, however, not only revived his personal and professional spirit, but also will play a role in the city's recovery efforts. Living in a guesthouse efficiency studio in New Orleans during July as part of the art community, Kulikowski focused on the destruction caused by Hurricane Katrina's flooding and its effect on the city, the city's rebuilding efforts, its historical climate, its culture, and its art community.

Exploring the city with cameras and a sketchbook

The Simsbury Education Association member explored the city with his sketchbook and cameras to create color sketches and take photos. They will be the basis for paintings that will capture Katrina's impact on the French Quarter and Garden District as well as the heavily damaged areas of Lakeview, Gentilly, New Orleans East, and the Ninth Ward.

"It was an amazing and emotional experience," he says. "I met many strong and inspirational people, took more than 400 photos, drew a series of sketches, and interviewed more than 30 local artists and gallery owners to get their firsthand accounts and views on the city's future."



His monthlong stay was funded by a grant from the Art Renewal for Teachers (ART) Program, which is managed by The Philanthropic Initiative (TPI) in Boston. Grants fund summer projects for visual arts teachers in Massachusetts and in Hartford and Litchfield counties in Connecticut.

Kulikowski fell in love with New Orleans several years ago while a delegate to an NEA Representative Assembly there. “The cultural blend of history, architecture, music, and food were matched only by the excitement of the many working art studios and galleries,” he recalls. “Original art was alive and valued, and could be seen on nearly every street,” adds Kulikowski, who is among eight teachers — but the only Connecticut teacher — to receive 2007 ART grants.



Passionate about helping New Orleans

Ever since Katrina struck in 2005, Kulikowski has been passionate about doing everything he can to help the city. One of his first actions was to raise money for local charities by framing and selling photos he took of the city’s French Quarter during previous visits. He also made brief trips to New Orleans in spring and summer 2006 to volunteer with clean-up efforts — and to take photos showing areas ravaged by the floods. Kulikowski spent many evenings editing those photos to create a PowerPoint presentation to show at a local libraries and schools. During that time he became even more determined to spread the word about the effects of Katrina. He also realized that his images now had a purpose that could benefit New Orleans.

So in fall 2006, Kulikowski applied for an ART grant to pursue his next logical step: living in New Orleans for an extended period. “I felt it would help me tell a much more personal story so people would better understand that much still needs to be done in rebuilding New Orleans. I envision my photos and color sketches as great paintings that can have a significant social message.”

Breathing new life into his creative soul

An art teacher for 30 years, Kulikowski says the ART project definitely influenced his professional and personal growth. “My energy and excitement for creating art once again came alive — the trip breathed new life into my creative soul.”

During August, Kulikowski compiled his photos and interview notes for a TPI presentation in October. He is also sharing his photographs and paintings with students as part of social art lessons that introduce the world of art as a place where ideas and feelings can come to life and often impact others.

“My concern for a city I love so much inspired me artistically and brought new vigor to my teaching,” he says. “I now have a stronger sense of my abilities and have been emotionally and creatively rejuvenated as a teacher and an artist.”

As an artist and art teacher at Simsbury’s Henry James Memorial School, Paul Kulikowski has produced art in a wide variety of media, but none will likely have the social or emotional impact as the images he created in New Orleans this summer. His trip was funded by a grant from the Art Renewal for Teachers (ART) Program.