

Mural Impacts Hundreds of Students

Leila Celestin is passionate about collaborative creativity

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Leila Celestin completes a section of the mural at the Arts and Communications Academy (ACA) in Benton Harbor, Michigan. (Photo by Edgar Burgara)

By: Gillian Sanner, media communications manager, IMC

Leila Celestin, graduate student in the Department of Speech-Language Pathology & Audiology at Andrews University, is passionate about collaborative creativity. "A lot of people don't believe they can be creative," she says, "but in a group and with the right tools, they can do cool things." So, when Carlisle Sutton approached Leila about the idea of a mural for a local school, Leila, who also holds a Bachelor of Fine Arts with a painting emphasis, was ready for a creative project.

Carlisle, director of Community Engagement Integration & Service at Andrews, had contacted the Arts and Communications Academy (ACA) in Benton Harbor, Michigan, to identify opportunities for service as part of Andrews University's first Change Day. After discussions with the principal and assistant principal, it was decided a mural would be helpful in improving the physical appearance of the facility. "Minority students in urban communities are not often presented with positive images of people who look like them," he says. "When we were informed we would be allowed to paint on the walls of the cafeteria, I thought we needed to use

the space to create a truly positive learning environment. This was an opportunity to have the students eat with people who shared their heritage — people with challenges who excelled in spite of the odds.”

Carlisle, Leila and Jace McKinney, also an Andrews student, developed the content for the mural, choosing to include the faces of individuals such as Nelson Mandela, the Obamas, Diana Ross, Angela Davis and Martin Luther King Jr. Because a wide variety of people would be painting the mural, Leila converted images to simple black-and-white silhouettes.

On September 14, Leila and a small team of artists arrived at ACA by about 7:30 a.m. They projected the images on the wall, traced the outlines with pencil, then began to paint. An additional group of Change Day volunteers arrived shortly after and helped push through the bulk of the project. Leila recalls, “People said, ‘I’m not an artist! Then they would get caught up in the little details of the black paint, step back and realize they just painted Muhammad Ali.”

ACA students funneled through the cafeteria as the images were being painted. Some recognized the silhouetted faces and exclaimed, “Oh, I know who that is!” For others, it was the first they learned the stories behind each image. Teachers were emotional, understanding how powerful the images could be for students. Even the school superintendent and the Benton Harbor High School principal stopped by to see the mural in process.

For Leila, the mural was inspiring. She says, “I hope that other students, artists and the church realize that creative work absolutely can be a service and impactful. If there’s any possible way I can connect youth and young people in a creative outlet as it relates to service, I will take that opportunity hands-down.”

Carlisle was also blessed by the project. “Hundreds of students will continue to sit and eat in a room that was transformed as a result of the actions of a team from Andrews University. We really can change the world, one face at a time.”

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