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KC Art Institute Students Use Refugee Farm as Inspiration for Their Artwork

Artwork Will Be Auctioned Off at Dig In Event

Cultivate Kansas City's Juniper Gardens Training Farm is a working farm in Kansas City, Kansas. But for some students at the Kansas City Art Institute (KCAI), it is a place of inspiration, and a visual paradise.

The beautiful colors and intricate texture of the Swiss chard, the strong root systems of the plants and even a pair of children's shoes caught the eyes of students enrolled in Casey Whittier's "The Conversational Dish" class during a recent visit. These and other visual elements have become the subject of ceramic centerpieces that will liven the tables at Cultivate Kansas City's Dig In KC dinner, set for September 17 at The City Market.

Whittier, an assistant professor in ceramics at KCAI and head for social practice, combined her two program areas to create this class. The idea is for students to interface with the community or aspects of culture and to use this as inspiration to create art. Juniper Gardens Training Farm is home to the New Roots for Refugees Program, which is a partnership between Cultivate Kansas City and Catholic Charities of NE Kansas. It provides a training ground for refugee families to use farming as a trade and help them get immersed into the Kansas City community. This cultural aspect caught the attention of Casey so she reached out to Cultivate Kansas City's Program Director Dr. Matthew Kost who worked with her to create a curriculum for her students. The students will be creating more than 30 centerpieces for the Dig In KC dinner. Some will be filled with herbs and flowers or vegetable leaves from the farm to connect the two organizations.

"While the tables are not a gallery, they can become the site of a conversation about art," Whittier said.

KCAI Senior Issac Logsdon has been a longtime buyer of produce from New Roots for Refugees farmers at the City Market so making a visit to the farm with his classmates helped him connect the dots.

"It was good to see the farm and where the food that I buy comes from," Logsdon said. "The layout and structure of the fields was inspiring."



He is depicting the root system of a plant on one of his centerpieces. He has created four slabs of clay with different root system designs that will come together to form a pot.

For Raegan Koapsel, junior, it wasn't the crops that caught her eye during her visit to the farm. She spotted a pair of children's shoes propped up in a corner.

"It humanized the whole program for me," she said. "I realized that the refugees are moving here not just for the prosperity of themselves, but also of their children."

She also was inspired by the support systems set up for the crops – industrial rods and tree branches that hold up the tomato plants and long beans. So she is recreating these rods as part of one of her centerpieces.

"They are symbolic that everyone needs support and structure to grow," Koapsel said.

All 11 students in the class captured a different element of the farm to portray. One even brought back some Swiss chard leaves and created a mold which he used to create the sides of his ceramic centerpiece.

The centerpieces will be auctioned off at the Dig In dinner. Their value? Priceless!

Tickets for Dig In are still available and can be purchased online at <http://www.cultivatekc.org/digin/tickets.html>.

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