

“We Are Here: Engaging in Art for Resilience and Reclamation of Space”  
Union, New Jersey, USA – June to August 2022  
Sienna Bucu – Brandeis University

Abstract: “We Are Here: Engaging in Art for Resilience and Reclamation of Space” is a project that will run from June 2022 to the beginning of August in the Township of Union Public School District (K-12) in Union, New Jersey. This Peace Project will bring together students with behavioral and academic setbacks, students in need of extra social emotional support, and students interested in art. It is a project of reclamation of current spaces through site specific murals in the High School and Middle Schools and one day stand-alone projects in the elementary schools. The project aims to incorporate the visual language of art as a tool to encourage communication and resilience with current and future generations within the school system. In considering how the project could have a lasting impact in the school communities, developing partnerships with the counseling department and art educators in the schools will be an important part of the process. The project will have the potential to continue through the school year and in future summer school programming.

The Township of Union Public School system serves approximately 7,675 students from diverse backgrounds. As of August 2020, there were approximately 25 open lawsuits in the Township of Union Public Schools spanning the scope of sexual misconduct, racism and discrimination on the basis of sexual orientation, as well as violations of IEPs and 504s. The environment surrounding these topics has no doubt affected the students of this community, and in many ways has failed to serve them. In November of 2020, I ran for the Board of Education in Union to amplify students' voices, draw attention to mental health initiatives and refocus the conversation on those who matter most-- the students.

The intention behind this project is to create a student-centered initiative that promotes community and resilience. Art has been pivotal in consciousness-building and peace movements throughout history and can be called upon here in Union's community. Utilizing the Davis Projects for Peace funds, I will create a three-tiered project involving the High School, Middle School, and Elementary School students of Union. Three site-responsive murals centering students' visions and their capacity to drive change will be executed by 6-10 students per building. This small group size will foster a closer group dynamic and promote better understanding and communication amongst participants. I will be working 20 hours a week, with two days in the high school, and one day in each of the two middle schools throughout the summer. The seven elementary schools will have standalone projects to be completed in each school on the fifth day of the week.

In Union High School, I will execute the project in “The Intersection,” which is the cross section of two hallways centrally located in a school which houses over 2,000 students. It is, to be plain, a nightmare to walk through, while passing with folks who are pushing or feeling their way through the space. The site of the project is significant as an often crowded and chaotic pathway within the school. The mural will help change the narrative of this location by marking it as a space of reclamation. At the high school level, students who are enrolled in summer school often have both academic and behavioral setbacks. The counselling department at the high school has agreed to help identify students to work with. Students may also opt into the project of their own accord. The content of the mural will be conceived as a group including myself, the students and the school staff supporting this project with the intent to draw attention to community care and peacebuilding.

There are two middle schools (grades 6-8), Kawameeh and Burnet, whose divide is perceived by students as both racialized and socialized. The unequal access to resources between

the two middle schools continues into the high school, perpetuating a divide which underlies many interactions between students. I will create projects in both middle schools relevant to their needs and host a celebration of the completion of these projects by bringing the two disparate student groups together. This will create connections which will allow for a more unified experience at the high school level, when these groups of students merge. Again, the murals will be generated by the groups within the schools and geared toward community building.

In the seven elementary schools, I will complete more individualized drawing projects surrounding the students and their relationship with community and kindness. These micro projects will be started and completed in one day. These projects will be a supplement to what is already going on in the building. The drawings will be brought together and digitally reproduced into a singular image which will be printed on a banner to be displayed in all the elementary schools in the district, bridging the gap between separate community schools.

Collaboration will be a key component of the project. Working alongside members of the Board of Education will ensure that the initiative brings together all those invested in the success of Union's students. Diane Esquivel, art teacher at Union High School, has agreed to help identify a student who would benefit from a structured summer job to work as my assistant. Lina Blanchet, a former teacher in the Union School district, has agreed to help facilitate mindfulness practices. She currently runs a mindfulness business, Stillness Rocks, is an Adjunct Instructor in the Mindfulness for Educators Program at Antioch University and works with people in exploring mindfulness at a deeper level. While she no longer resides in Union, she has been brought back to run workshops and knows the complexities of Union. This makes her the perfect person to help deepen the artistic practice to bring about peace. With specific support from the counseling department, as well as working in tandem with the Supervisors of K-12 curriculum, we will re-envision summer school initiatives from elementary through to the high school level.

Working within the building during summer school is intended to meet students where they are. The plan is to create a working environment where students can foster creativity, allow themselves space to heal, and to give back to their community. For this project, the process of creating is just as important, if not more, than the final result. The act of seeing each other and themselves making a lasting impression on the walls is an act of radical self and community care. The project supply list has been created with the needs of the high school in mind and leftover supplies will be donated for continued use. The budget also includes supply packs for students working in the high school and middle schools to work with and keep. This is because the projects within the high school and middle schools are long term and run throughout the summer, while the engagement at the elementary school levels is self-contained. Any leftover supplies will be donated to the high school as it has the highest need and will serve the most students; the students at the middle school will also benefit from the supplies left at the high school as they move up. The leftover supplies help to ensure that the practice of seeing and communicating one's needs and positionality through art will continue beyond the scope of this summer-length project.

The goal of this project is to imagine better worlds while grappling with current realities. There can be no peace without the reworking of spaces which we presently find ourselves in. By the end of the summer, participating students will have the results of their own hard work permanently inscribed on the walls of their school communities. They will also have the tools to build artistic communities and access to new coping skills. This project is also a marker of place – students who may go unseen and unheard will now have a permanent display of their presence made by their own hands. The impressions on the walls signify that they will not be forgotten or dismissed. They matter.