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IMAGINE ACADEMY Students Create Wonders

By Jennifer MacGregor

In a small gallery space in midtown Manhattan, visitors scrambled to get red stickers up on the wall next to their chosen piece of artwork — pieces were selling fast. In minutes, collages, paintings and photographs were flying off the walls.

The art this evening was made by students at the Imagine Academy for Autism, a small school in Brooklyn that is dedicated to helping children with Autism Spectrum disorder reach their fullest social, emotional, physical and academic potential. The work of all 21 students in the school was represented in the show, which boasted 105 pieces of framed work.

The gallery was sponsored by Bear Givers, a nonprofit organization that enables children to give teddy bears to other children in need. The goal is to empower them, said Diane Lempert, the president of Bear Givers, and the gallery is another opportunity to do just that. The galleries have a great effect on the students, the parents and the schools involved.

Lempert said that Bear Givers has been sponsoring annual fundraising art galleries for schools since 2009, and this was the first gallery exhibition for Imagine Academy. All of the proceeds from the night will benefit programs at the school.

"It's amazing," Ellana Sanders, the director of mental health services, said about the gallery. "The students are overwhelmed, they're bright eyed. I've never seen anything like it." She hopes this is the first of many galleries the students and their families will be able to participate in.

"Art is a really good form of communication for our kids," said Faith Condon, the art therapist at Imagine, who works with the students both one-on-one and in group sessions. She lets the children take the lead when creating their art — the process is all about getting the children to communicate and explore their creative selves. She pointed out the work of Moshe Zito, a 12-year-old student who is talented in photography and enjoys taking pictures of the environment.

The principal of Imagine, Elisa Chrem, said that the event was all about making the children feel special, and for many of them this gallery was the first time they experienced being in the spotlight.

Wendy Jemal, whose son Gabriel is a student at the school, left that evening with a shopping bag full of framed artwork, including the work of her son. "I have to show his siblings what he can do," she said. #

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