

BORDER ART BLOSSOMS

FALA students decorate border wall with butterflies

Friendship project part of annual trip to borderlands



Photograph courtesy of Chiara Skabelund

CORINA VANEK Sun Staff Reporter

Feb. 4, 2017

A section of the border wall with Mexico in Agua Prieta, Mexico will shine in the night thanks to 1,000 glow in the dark butterfly stickers placed there by students and community members from Flagstaff Arts and Leadership Academy.

The project, designed by Flagstaff artist Shawn Skabelund, whose daughter, Chiara, attends FALA, was part of the school's annual border trip, organized by art teacher Janeece Henes.

The idea for an art installation at the border wall came to Skabelund about two years ago, and he chose butterflies because they are a symbol of hope, he said. The border wall on the Mexican side contains other art installations like murals and religious imagery, but it is not legal to decorate the side of the wall that faces the United States, Skabelund said.



FALA students put glue on stickers that will be applied to the Mexican side of the border wall. Photograph Courtesy of Chiara Skabelund

Henes said the Mexican side of the wall has become a place for artwork, and she has worked on other projects at the border wall.

“It’s become a place where people can use to build art and to build community,” she said. “People have come to put beauty on it.”

The butterfly installation was originally planned to go in the desert, where Skabelund said most migrants attempting to cross the border will go. However, it was “almost impossible” logistically to set it up there, he said.

Students putting the butterfly stickers on the wall were joined by students from a high school in Agua Prieta, called Colegio Bilingue Benemerito de las Americas, along with the mayor of Agua Prieta, Hector Rubalcava Gastelum, and the mayor of Douglas, Ariz., the city that borders Agua Prieta, Robert Uribe.



Elected officials from Agua Prieta, Mexico, and Douglas, Ariz., stick glow in the dark butterfly stickers to the border wall in Agua Prieta. Photograph courtesy of Chiara Skabelund

Katie Giovale, a FALA student who went on the trip, said working as an artist and seeing other artwork at the border showed her how powerful art can be.

“All of us as artists were able to see how much art can have an impact,” she said. “Art can send a message to people and it can change perspectives.”

Giovale said the part of the trip that struck her the most was visiting Operation Streamline in Tucson, where undocumented immigrants who have been caught in the United States are taken for criminal proceedings.

Dillon Hlohinec said he was taken by surprise at the kindness and friendliness he experienced with people in Mexico.

“Everyone was kind, sharing with us,” he said. “They embraced our company.”

Geneva Rusk said the experience humanized border issues for her, and let her see that people who cross the border illegally are people. Rusk said meeting people at a migrant center in Agua Prieta was a powerful experience for her.

“Seeing them as people made it even harder to see them dehumanized in court,” she said.

Maya Wirtanen said the piece was powerful in bringing people together.

“The border art piece was really fun,” she said. “We worked with so many people. It was cool to see how stickers on a wall can build community.”

Justine Kennedy, another student who attended the trip, said it was “eye-opening” to be on both sides of the border and experience processing of undocumented immigrants.

Kennedy said she would like more people to have the chance to visit the border and learn about the process, which she said might change people’s perspective on immigration and deportation.

“It was really inspiring, but it was also really sad,” Kennedy said. “It was my first time seeing the border in person, so it had been more of a construct to me, not a physical thing. Now I question why we need to separate ourselves with these physical barriers.”

Kennedy said work like theirs in controversial spaces can ignite progress.

“It’s a way to change the world through art,” she said.

Chiara Skabelund, Shawn’s daughter, got emotional talking about the border and current political discussions around it, including President Donald Trump’s efforts to complete and fortify the border wall.

“It’s been really hard coming back with everything that’s going on,” she said. “Seeing how the new administration has done so much that’s torn up the country more than it’s already been is really frustrating. We need to work hard on educating through art.”