

SCHOOL #14

"My city, my world"

Students create local and global understanding through arts



Students at IPS #14 gather round artist and photographer William Rasdell to view online images from South Africa as part of the "My City, My World" cultural education program. (L to R) Ayreonna, Mariah (both 5th grade), Dana, Aaliyah and Taquasha (6th graders).

By Mary Beth Kuhns
Eastside Voice Correspondent

Through an after-school program that combines culture, technology, and the arts, students at IPS #14 are expanding their understanding of what constitutes their community. By sharing photographs with students in South Africa, they are learning how they are part of a shared world community that is not confined to just their local neighborhoods.

Photographer and artist William Rasdell created and facilitates this cultural arts exchange and education program called "My City, My World." Students at three Indianapolis schools (IPS #14, IPS #43 and Cold Spring Elementary) share their cultural experiences through photography and new media with youth in Cape Town, South Africa.

The goal of the program isn't to show the students how vastly different Cape Town is from Indianapolis; rather, it is to show how much the cities are similar. Rasdell says the local students are always surprised to see photographs of neighborhoods in Cape Town with a McDonald's or a KFC on the corner. "They realize how they are part of a larger and different community," he said.

The local students learn about South Africa by viewing Rasdell's own photography and the photos shared by the South African students. The students initially create a video recording introducing themselves to their South African neighbors, and vice versa. Then the students take photographs of their local communities to share. Rasdell provides digital cameras that the students in both countries are able to borrow to photograph the cultural elements of their neighborhood. This allows the students to learn about culture and community both from the shared international photographs and the process of taking photos locally. "The goal is to give young people an understanding of how their neighborhood functions

and with that understanding, they can better understand their responsibility to their community," said Rasdell.

"My City, My World" is funded in part by the Efroymsen Family Foundation and is part of the Perspectives After-school Program sponsored by the Indianapolis Museum of Art. Near the conclusion of the school year, the IMA will host an exhibit during the Perspectives Family Presentation that will showcase the student's involvement in the program.

In addition to cultural education, this program helps improve the students' digital and technical skills; they work with new media portals such as GoogleEarth, YouTube, Flickr and IMA's ArtBabble. Using GoogleEarth, they view their own neighborhoods and surrounding areas, as well as the communities 9,000 miles away. "The focus is to get them to examine their neighborhoods and see that they can grow beyond their community," said Rasdell.

Rasdell said one young local girl was baffled when she started the program, wondering what South African students would do with digital cameras in the jungle. She didn't have a concept of an urban presence in Africa. "This program gives them a global window," he said. "And a clarity they wouldn't otherwise have."

The South African students have an idea of American culture that is distorted through media (i.e. television and rap music) and Rasdell helps them see a truer reality by their interaction with the children here.

Starting in 2008, Rasdell began visiting South Africa annually for this project. While there, he takes his own photography and works with young people at the ComART community center in Elsie's River, Cape Town. The South African students come to the community center twice a week for this program, but must go to another facility for Internet access. Rasdell said that because they are participating on their own,

and not through school, they take the program very seriously. "Fifteen years after the end of apartheid... their desire to excel is at a peak." During his last visit, earlier this year, the South African students became very interested in light paintings, which involve using flashlights to decorate photographs. The students used this method to produce portraits of their local living legends for their celebration of Human Rights Day. These photographs and more information about the program can be found on Rasdell's blog: <http://wrasdell.wordpress.com/south-africa>

Rasdell has been involved in arts education programs since the mid-seventies. His work has allowed him to visit Cuba regularly. But when this program began, he wanted to explore a new venue, and South Africa was a perfect choice. "As an artist, I am always looking for new ground. I was looking for a new perspective to work from," Rasdell said. With this program he has a long-range vision and sees the potential for several years of study.

Rasdell will return to South Africa again in February. He is excited that he has been invited to exhibit in the Cape Town International Jazz Festival in April. He plans his visits around large cultural events. He goes in mid-February during the Spier Performing Arts Festival and stays through the jazz festival in April. The festivals give him inspiration and provide subject matter for much of his photography.

Rasdell's original artistic photography, which is the starting point for this program, inspiring the students to learn more and photograph their own communities, can be seen at his studio in the basement of the Harrison Center for the Arts at 16th and Delaware. The Harrison participates regularly in the First Friday Art Tours in downtown Indianapolis. This Friday, December 4th, is open studio night at the Harrison; so be sure to visit Rasdell this Friday evening and view his inspiring work.