Student-designed mural brings color to a housing community for older adults

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When it comes to giving back to the community, sometimes all you need is imagination, collaboration – and a bit of paint.

For students under the direction of associate professor Kelly Leslie, who leads the Illustration, Design and Animation program in the School of Art, that lesson was perfectly illustrated along 80 feet of concrete at the B'nai B'rith Covenant House – an affordable housing community for older adults.

Leslie and the students in her Clients and the Community class worked with Covenant House residents to develop and paint a mural on a wall of the housing complex's outdoor common area. The finished product depicts a scene of vibrant Southern Arizona flora and fauna including saguaros and other cacti, javelina, a coyote and a family of quail.

The mural was designed by Valeria Jimenez, a junior studying studio art who took Leslie's class in the fall. Jimenez and her classmates met with Covenant House residents to discuss their vision for the mural. Students designed their own concepts and submitted the plans to residents, who then chose their favorite.

"When I think of art, I feel like a lot of people tend to look for art that expresses things they don't normally see every day," Jimenez said. "They look for aesthetics, or want to experience a different emotion or concept. But I was surprised that a lot of the Covenant House residents wanted to see more of Arizona and that some people actually want to see things they do see every day – just through a different perspective."

With a guiding vision in mind, Jimenez grabbed pencil and paper to design a scale model of her landscape. She said she was truly surprised to learn her mural was chosen by Covenant House residents.

"As an artist, I tend to be very emotionally attached to my art," she said. "If I don't feel a lot of emotion while I'm creating my art it doesn't turn out exactly as I imagined, or things tend to go wrong. I thought I would be able to express certain things better through the Arizona landscape. I was able to express what I wanted to through my art, and people enjoyed seeing that."

Jimenez and her classmates spent three days at the end of the fall semester creating the mural. Leslie helped her students turn Jimenez's sketches into digital artwork. After Covenant House staff painted a base coat on roughly 80 feet of the 4-foot-high wall, Jimenez's artwork was projected onto the wall in sections. Students first completed an outline and came back over the next few days to add paint.

The finished piece now adds a bit of color to a stretch of private space within the Covenant House community, which is located near East Speedway Boulevard and North Columbus Boulevard at 4414 E. Second St.

The mural was one of several such undertakings by Leslie's class, which focuses on providing students with real-world project experience by working with real-world clients.

"I really want to focus on working with community partners that give back to their own community in some way," Leslie said. "We are looking for and working with lots of different kinds of organizations – and that includes the global community, too. We've previously worked with clients in Canada and Philadelphia, but this most recent semester was more regional, which was fabulous."

Students in last semester's class also worked with the Morley Arts District in Nogales and the Blue Lotus Artists Collective in downtown Tucson to design marketing materials, and for the University Libraries Special Collections exhibit "Sanctuary: Who Belongs Here? The Search for Homeland on the U.S.-Mexico Border, 1848 to Today."

No matter where the murals are found, Leslie said, the whole process helps her students better understand what it means to live as part of a larger community – and how to facilitate positive changes in the world.

"It felt like we became part of that community, and understanding how design and art can change a community for the better is important," Leslie said. "We saw that firsthand at Covenant House."

Covenant House Board President Abbie Stone, who first approached Leslie about the project, said the finished mural is a beautiful addition to the community.

"I went around right before Christmas and delivered holiday presents to our residents, and you can see the mural from peoples' windows," Stone said. "They all told me how cool it was to be able to look out and see the mural."

"I think it was an incredible collaboration and we're so lucky to have the University as a resource."