

Students' masks are link between Kenya, St. Paul's

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Lined up along a wall in the Ward Center for the Arts are masks created by Kenyan students, each decorated with tribal colors and symbols, and some with elaborately-braided hair.

In contrast, masks created by seventh- and eighth-graders from St. Paul's School and St. Paul's School for Girls include things like Shakespearean quotes, bright colors, long hair and mathematical equations.

Though the masks come from different hemispheres, they do have at least one thing in common: They show who the students are inside, and what their world is like.

The masks and accompanying books are part of The Kiboko Projects, founded in 1999 by Mark Scheflen. The project brings creative and artistic opportunities to people without much access to multimedia art.

Its latest exchange, "My Life & Country, Kenya," brings the work of students from two Kenyan schools to the world.

Scheflen worked with students from St. Nicholas School, an urban primary and secondary school in Nairobi, and Moi Forces, Lanet, a rural secondary school in Nakuru.

"Those masks really grab you. They're powerful and important," Scheflen said. He noted that the masks from St. Paul's schools are more individualistic in comparison to the Kenyan masks, which are more national in focus.

The Kenyan students made masks decorated to reflect their lives. They also created books that tell about their homes and a video that features local interviews.

For the Kenyan students, Scheflen said the project helps them "explore what life is like in their villages."

He noted that many of the rural students are from different tribes and many of the urban students are refugees.

"Their stories are about issues: poverty, HIV, AIDS and drugs," Scheflen said.

Scheflen takes the masks, books and video to schools and hospitals around the world, where youngsters and adults create their own multimedia works.

"Every organization adds a new layer," Scheflen said.

St. Paul's teacher Jodie Beeler led the effort with St. Paul's School for Girls teacher Ann Oster.

"The students have just loved it. It's been a great experience," Oster said.

Beeler agreed, adding, "It's been a really good collaboration, connecting with teenagers in another culture."

Oster viewed the project as a way to teach her students about Africa and Kenya.

"The fact is that this is a school where our kids don't know much about Kenya and poverty," she said. "This is what I can do to give them this experience."

One of the most interesting elements was the dominance of pop culture in the masks of students from St. Paul's schools.

"We can see our differences and have a sense of how fortunate we are here in the United States," Beeler said.

Scheflen agreed. "Kenyan kids have no Internet or many magazines, and have no resources to buy any."

But he feels much of that is changing with a new president, Uhuru Kenyatta, who has "opened things up," allowing discussion of topics formerly not allowed, particularly HIV and AIDS.

One day, Scheflen envisions a large exhibit with a display of all the masks, which so far number in the hundreds.

Scheflen hopes other schools will adopt the program. "We have racism, war, all these issues to deal with. This is on a very small level but it could help us all get along in the world," he said.

"They're learning how to be creative. It's integrative art, using art and media, both text and visual," Scheflen said. "They use art to express themselves among themselves and other audiences."