Students cut textbooks to reinforce anti-bullying lessons

Middle school students' altered books housed at Jaffe Center

By Eric P. Newcomer, Sun Sentinel
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Boca Raton —

They began as a pile of old, unwanted textbooks at Indiantown Middle School and turned into something much more beautiful, unique and meaningful.

These altered books are no longer mere containers of unread black letters on white pages. They have had holes cut into them, messages scrawled on them, their binding dismantled and pictures pasted on them.

"Some kids completely destroyed their books and reconstructed them as sculptures," said Jennifer Gironda, an art teacher at Indiantown Middle School.

Gironda, looking to teach her eighth-graders about the dangers of bullying, required each student to select one of three words — fairness, caring and respect — to symbolically illustrate with their projects.

"By making them more aware of things like caring, respect and fairness, it makes them aware that those are desirable traits," Gironda said. "When those things are not present, that's when you have bullying."

She invited John Cutrone, programs coordinator for the Jaffe Center for Book Arts at Florida Atlantic University, to introduce the teenagers to a way of expressing her anti-bullying lessons.

Cutrone taught them about altered books, a form of artwork where normal books are transformed through cutting, painting and various other means.

Some might say these discarded books, which years ago prepared students for high school, have been desecrated. But to the students and the staff at the Jaffe Center, they have become artwork. And they are being treated accordingly, exhibited in a glass case at the university until the end of July.

Cutrone brought along some of the books in the center's collection, which he used to illustrate the range of possibilities available to the students.

"We show them things that they'd probably never seen before in terms of what books can be," Cutrone said. "My goal is to broaden their perspectives."

Magdalena Cardona, 14, a student in Gironda's eighth-grade art class, turned the rectangular textbook into a guitar shape. She chose the theme word "respect," saying she hoped that people could get along by respecting each others' musical tastes.

"My friend, she likes a lot of hip-hop," Cardona said. "I like country, hip-hop, rap, R&B and [music from Guatemala]."

"You should just respect the kind of music that people like."

Eric Newcomer can be reached at enewcomer@SunSentinel.com or 561-243-6633.

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