

MARBLEHEAD REPORTER

Marblehead kids turn trash into art with a message

Four organizations, scores of kids, and a handful of educators made one community project happen

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Mix a large group of kids with some green-minded teens and artists from Marblehead High School and a big pile of trash and what do you get?

An art installation with a pretty strong message.

Sustainable Marblehead's Jean Skaane was moved by the work of a Norway artist Pipip Ferner who had created life-sized sculptures in parks around the country from plastic trash she had collected along the shores.

"The sculptures spoke to me," Skaane said. "They added life and a story to the trash."

During a cleanup at Seaside Park in June, Skaane mentioned the idea to a few members of MHS's National Green School Society, an environmentally based club that aims to make an impact in the schools and the community. MHS students Sophie Hauck, Ann Sabin, and Luca Scola loved the idea and what's more, ran with it, Skaane said.

Hauck said they pulled the National Art Honor Society into the project as well and after a number of conversations they came up with their own vision for a public art project. This one included creating a lot of smaller pieces of art by a lot of different artists that would come together to produce one clear message on the need to reduce waste.

"We had students and we had trash," said Sabin, indicating it was an easy decision.

How to build an art installation

At the time the NGSS was doing weekly clean-ups all over town.

“We collected trash from all the clean-ups and stored it at the Transfer Station,” said Scola who is a member of both NGSS and the National Art Honor Society.

Scola said he took on the job of cleaning it all, which did not exactly thrill his parents.

“It was all over the lawn,” he said, with a laugh.

Another conservation group got in on the fun and donated “really good trash” from its cleanups, said Sabin, whose favorite find included a mermaid Barbie and tiny shoes.

SPUR, a local nonprofit on Anderson Street gave the teens space to hold workshops. Kids in grades K-high school were invited, over a span of eight weeks, to come and create sea creatures from the cleaned and sorted trash.

Hauck said the irony of the situation was not lost on the kids, that they were using trash to create creatures that in reality were being harmed by the trash.

“Really, the best part was it allowed the kids to connect back and they did,” Sabin said.

Katie Gardner said once they had the artwork, the challenge became how to build a narrative.

“We wanted to make people draw the conclusion that this (trash) is a problem without us telling them,” said Gardner. “The trick is to get them to make the connection themselves.”

Where to put the installation

The project needed to be accessible to the kids and their parents and members of the public at large said Gardner. That meant getting it into schools, local businesses, and restaurants, not easy to do in the middle of a pandemic.

So the first installation went into the lobby of the high school. The glass cases at the front entrance are filled with colorful creatures anchored by statistics and inspirational quotes.

Scola added blue lights giving an underwater feel to the project. Members of the National Art Honor Society created a backdrop giving the piece more depth.

A sign overhead asks viewers, “You know you are supposed to reduce waste and not litter. What if no one told you why you should protect the environment?”

The hope is to use the 50 or so other pieces that didn’t make it into this show for installations at other schools and when COVID-19 makes it possible, they will approach local businesses as well.

Lessons learned

Hauck admits she worries that eventually, the project will turn back into what it started out as, trash, but she also realizes that is a much bigger conversation. For her, a small sign amid the display that reads “Saving the world is hard but making small changes is easy” is her favorite part of the entire installation.

“I think it encapsulates everything we’re working toward,” she said.

Picking up trash and putting it into an art installation starts a conversation, she explained.

MHS student Sadie Clark said for her the best part of the project was seeing generations come together for one sole purpose, “to better the community and help the environment.”

And for all of them a chance to work together and make a difference while socially distanced, in the middle of a pandemic, after months of isolation, was also a “best part.”

“In a time, during this pandemic, this brought us hope,” said Clark.

“They are an impressive group,” Skaane said. “Articulate, thoughtful in their words and actions, organized, and passionate. I look forward to what they do next.”