

Library Hosts Student Art Exhibit By English Language Learners

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“Hopeful Things” a thought provoking art exhibition by English Language Learners from four Hartford Public School academies went on display this week at the main branch of the Hartford Public Library to commemorate National Welcoming America Week – an annual celebration that promotes meaningful connections and a spirit of unity between U.S. and foreign born Americans.

The week kicked off on Monday, Sept. 17, at the library, 500 Main St., with a naturalization ceremony in which more than 100 Hartford area residents were sworn in as new U.S. citizens.

An essay about each student artist’s aspirations for a new and successful life in the United States accompanied every artwork. Some students wrote about escaping war-ravaged homelands and living in refugee camps before coming to the United States.

The 31 student pieces in the library’s third-floor Art Walk gallery include a striking untitled painting of a man raising a peace flag by Hay Win Koko of the Academy of Engineering and Green Technology. Another piece by Hay Mu Soe, also from the academy, is of a large glass jar full of folded paper birds and stars in the Japanese origami tradition. Each bird and star symbolizes a free person and a sign invites visitors to open the jar and take one, while making a wish.

The student artists, whose home languages include, Afrikaans, French, Haitian Creole, Karen, Somali, Thai, Urdu and Spanish, attend the Academy of Engineering and Green Technology, the Law and Government Academy, the Nursing Academy and the Journalism and Media Academy.

More than 17 percent of Hartford Public School students are English Language Learners, representing 70 different language groups. About 7,000 of those students speak Spanish at home. Another 230 are Serbo-Croatian and about 110 are Karen students from Myanmar.

The Hopeful Things exhibit began last May as a contest sponsored by the Mark Twain House and Museum in response to an exhibit of malicious Jim Crow era images called “Hateful Things” that was also displayed at the museum. Both exhibitions remained at the museum until early September.

“Our ELL students have never had an opportunity such as this to share the stories of their homeland and their hopes for the United States,” said Mary-Beth Russo, who, as the district’s lead facilitator for English Language Learners, was instrumental in organizing the exhibit. “The fact that they have now been exhibited at two prime locations in the city validates for them their importance in the world.”