

For kids, art is not simply for art's sake

By [Ernest Hooper](#), Metro Columnist , St. Petersburg Times
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President Barack Obama will soon receive a poster of a wall-sized mural painted by kids at Community Stepping Stones, an upstart art school in Tampa's Sulphur Springs neighborhood. The mural reflects the dichotomy between the beautiful blue gulf before the oil spill and the dark, despair-filled nature of the waters since BP's Deepwater Horizon accident.

The kids mixed handcrafted paintings of fish and jellyfish with words expressing their feelings about the pre- and post-spill Gulf. On the left, you see "clean," "happy" and "hope." On the right, it's "betrayed," "shocked" and "murderers."

"When I saw whales dying, I started to cry a little bit," said Quinton Camp, 14.

"When I found out about the oil spill, I was really hurt," added Laryanna Burns, 13.

Clearly, the mural illustrates so much more than how the spill has impacted the gulf. It's a communication vehicle, a portrait of emotion and a civics lesson.

Whether this becomes the first in many lessons learned by these students or the end of their art exploration rests in part with the Hillsborough County Commission, which holds a budget workshop at 1:30 p.m. today and a public hearing at 6 p.m. today.

As *Times* performing arts critic John Fleming reported earlier this month, the county plans to eliminate funding to the Arts Council of Hillsborough County for cultural development grants. In the current fiscal year, the council distributed more than \$300,000 to 25 organizations, including Community Stepping Stones.

What do you risk by not funding such institutions? Ask Yvenel Casseide.

Casseide, 18, knows all too well about how art can enhance young minds. When he came to Stepping Stones at age 12, he found himself grappling with the challenges of his hardscrabble upbringing in Sulphur Springs.

In one of his earliest self-portraits, Casseide displays an uncanny ability to handle various colors. The multiple shades of brown he infused in his face shows a deft touch, but his developing art skills tell only half the story.

A burning tree dominates the background of his portrait. The flames, in hues of orange and red and even green and blue, appear to be leaping from his hair. It reflects the anger about his life at the time.

"I had a lot going on personally with school, parents, home," Casseide said. "I was passionately angry."

A more recent self-portrait shows a forlorn Casseide staring into the horizon, a moon rising in the background. Or is it a sun setting?

"It's a distorted ambiguity," Casseide explained. "I'm looking spaced out because I'm not sure about my future."

Casseide's uncertainty has given way to aspirations of attending the Ringling College of Art and Design after he graduates from Blake High School next spring. Through art, he's channeled raw emotions into a positive vision.

I recognize that every group receiving money from the county faces scrutiny and a possible reduction. Tough times demand it, but as I've written before about other programs, the board must weigh the impact of such cuts.

Cutting the arts is not simply reducing the number of finger-painting pictures kids hang on the refrigerator. It's eliminating a tool our youth can use to save themselves.

That's all I'm saying.

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