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Art class learns from Edmonton collage artist



By Amanda Richardson
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Edmonton-based artist Heather Shillinglaw, right, takes time Monday with a number of Composite High School students, including Grade 9 student Cierra Lowery, 15, as a part of an Alberta Foundation for the Arts grant. AMANDA RICHARDSON/TODAY STAFF

Students at Composite Community High School are getting a chance this week to delve into new art styles under the watchful eye of Métis contemporary artist Heather Shillinglaw.

As a part of an Alberta Foundation for the Arts grant, Edmonton-based Shillinglaw will be in town Monday through May 2 giving guidance and inspiration to the students.

"I'm a collage artist, so I use many different materials," said Shillinglaw. "In the classroom here today they've used watercolour, oil pastels, chalk pastels, fabrics, acrylic mediums, pencil — for me, when I teach, I like to use lots of different materials because I find that it can express the art in many different ways."

Saying she can often bring a different perspective to a class, Shillinglaw says it's important to bring professional artists into classrooms.

"Sometimes it's better for a different eye, working with the kids and introducing other, different styles and techniques," explained Shillinglaw, saying the students will create three different pieces with her. "I lead a very free and open program where I let the artists decide some tools or negotiations of where they're going to put the paint, how they're going to build their composition and I provide the materials and they explore through them. It's a unique opportunity to work with the kids, because as a practising artist, perhaps I think a little bit differently than an art teacher and how she introduces things."

Jennifer Polischuk, a fine arts teacher at Composite who originally applied for the grant, says in a remote town like Fort McMurray where the professional artist pool is smaller than in a metropolis like Edmonton, it's nice to have the option of bringing people to town to work with the students.

"For this community, I think it has a huge impact, because we don't really have too many artists come up here," said Polischuk. "Having someone like Heather Shillinglaw come up to this community and do art workshops has a big impact, because I can't really take my students to art galleries or take them on art field trips, so for me, having a well-known artist come up and do workshops is a big benefit to my students."

On top of exploring new techniques and mediums, Shillinglaw says it's a prime example of the viability of art as a career choice, a sentiment Polischuk agrees with.

"I'm hoping that (the students) will see an artist that's an established artist, working as an artist," said Polischuk. "I find in this community a lot of people focus on trade, and a lot of students that come in here that are good at art don't think that they'll make a lot of money at it, or that they can get work as an artist. So having someone that is an established artist, and that's her job, is a good thing for my students to see."

Shillinglaw will also hold a three-day residence at Westwood Community High School this week and an artist talk Saturday in the Snye room at MacDonald Island Park from 7 to 8:30 p.m.

Work from both schools will go on display as part of a collaborative exhibit May 2 at the MacDonald Island Community Art Gallery. Opening night reception begins at 7 p.m.

amanda.richardson@sunmedia.ca

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