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Art as a Tool in Science Communication

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Public Art and Science

I was only 45 minutes into the day's painting, but was already questioning my decision to partake in the unconventional artistic endeavor that lay before me. My knees ached from kneeling on concrete, and my arms were covered in white primer. I had my design laying beside me - a blueprint to help guide my brush. As I was glancing over to double check the proportions, I saw a small pair of shoes, pink with Velcro straps.

A little girl looked at the design, then at me and said,

“What are you doing to the bench?”

“I’m painting it,” I replied.

“Oh, is that what it’s gonna look like?” said the girl, pointing to the design with her toe, struggling a bit to keep her balance.

“Yeah, that’s the plan! It’s going to take a while though; I’m just getting started.”

The small child smiled at me and said “That one’s my favorite,” before skipping off to play on the playground a few feet from the bench.

She had pointed to the girl on my design that had red hair and a peachy complexion; the one that looked just like her. I smiled to myself, and kept working.

Annually the Iowa City downtown district commissions local artists to submit designs based on a one-word theme. This year’s theme was change. All semester, I had been working with two of my peers to find ways to help diversify STEM fields. We aimed to raise awareness about the startling inequalities that still exist in STEM fields. These inequalities, built upon decades of exclusion, often go unnoticed. While the faces allowed within our STEM classes have evolved and become more inclusive, the bedrocks of STEM establishment continue to slow the progress of change.

I composed a design that I felt represented true diversity in STEM. I painted mixed silhouettes of men and women scientists in all different colors to help symbolize that there is a scientist within everyone. These portraits were faceless and nameless, allowing anyone to imagine themselves wedged between images of beakers, chemicals, syringes, and DNA.

After my design was selected, I had the daunting task of executing the design on a public bench, with a sea of people watching my every move. At times, it felt like more of a performance art piece than a painted one. Although I didn’t always need to reference my original design to execute my day’s work, I made a habit of setting it beside me so my audience could see my final vision.

I was stopped every few minutes by curious passersby. They wanted to know what the DNA helix was, and frequently asked about my inspiration. Kids proudly identified the hexagons in the chemical structure, and elderly women were quick to point out painting “boo boos” that I’d need to clean up. Every day, I was surprised by the way complete strangers found that this project resonated with them. They, too, believed that there was a scientist within anyone.

92 people engaged with me during the 28 hours it took to paint the bench. The colorful conversations about science and art made the time move quickly and made me feel as though the message was being heard.

I was a little sad to see it end as I carefully signed my name to the bottom right corner. “Looks like you finally finished,” a girl said quietly.

I was a little startled by the voice, so consumed in my own thoughts, I hadn’t heard her approach. I looked at the girl beside me -- wild red hair, same pink shoes.

I said, “Yeah, looks like I’m finally done.”

“Took you long enough!” She said before running off again, into the arms of her mother who waved sheepishly, mouthing “Sorry!” followed by a smile.