COMPASSION STORY OF THE MONTH

PHOTOS PROVIDED

GF-CJC Director John Ungerleider, Principal John Broadley and and muralist Negina Azimi at BFUHS.

Creating compassionate murals

By John Ungerleider

As a project of the Greater Falls Community Justice Center (GFCJC), based in Bellows Falls and Springfield, we have brought Afghani woman muralist Negina Azimi to paint murals with students in area schools. We focus on the theme of justice. In restorative-style circles, students discuss what justice means to them and generate themes, words, and mostly images that Negina can incorporate into a mural. Her time and effort are funded by a grant to the center from Ben and Jerry's.

We have completed murals in two schools so far, at Bellows Falls Union High School with Laura Tabachnick's Social Studies class and at Dummerston Schools with Nicole Thomas' Student Leadership group. We plan to start another in the fall at Bellows Falls Middle School along with Student Council sponsor Chris Kelley, who served in the military in Afghanistan and Iraq.

The process of generating ideas for these murals helps students reflect and analyze key components of justice, which leads to assessments of fairness, inclusion, and compassion. Informed by practices and principles of restorative justice, students sit in a circle and speak one by one, sharing what is comfortable openly and honestly — from the heart. They listen to and seek to understand everyone in turn around the circle.

Negina Azimi with the mural at the Dummerston School.

Young people have a strong sense of what is fair and unfair. Teens struggle with feeling included as they are developing their own unique and shared sense of identity. They know intuitively the importance of compassion and kindness and how badly they can feel when disrespected and devalued.

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PHOTO PROVIDED

The Greater Falls Community Justice Center (GFCJC) brought Afghani woman muralist Negina Azimi to paint murals with students in area schools.

Murals

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At a time pained by chasms of political division and acrimony, creating murals together, after speaking honestly in restorative circles about meaningful issues, facilitates a shared focus on how we can be more inclusive and compassionate with each other in school and in life.

Students also build a sense of compassion for the refugee experience by hearing the story of Negina fleeing Afghanistan, as well as the challenges and oppressive living conditions of the family she has left behind, especially the women.

GFCJC also sponsored a mural, with the Rockingham Arts and Museum Project (RAMP), designed by Bellows Falls muralist Mark Ragonese. This mural was painted with fathers who took GFCJCs Parenting with Respect course and their children, as well as Negina and her sister Marwa, also an artist. We are waiting for permission to put up the finished mural, made out of wood pieces that fit like a puzzle, in a boarded-up window on the old fire station in downtown Bellows Falls.

Through these fun and creative arts projects, we applied reflective dialogue to allow middle and high school students to assess their own definitions of justice and express various meanings of compassion, for refugees and for themselves as young people in challenging times.

John Ungerleider, EdD, is Director of the Greater Falls Community Justice Center in Bellows Falls and Springfield.

Submissions, from Brattleboro area residents, for future publication, not to exceed 650 words, should be emailed to: compassionstory@gmail.com or mailed to: Compassion Story of the Month, PO Box 50, Marlboro, VT 05344. Please include your name, address, phone number and email address. Earlier submitted stories will automatically be considered in subsequent months. Our website is: https://www.compassionatebrattleboro.org.