

Walking into the room, you see two rows of colorfully-decorated desks facing a teacher's desk and a whiteboard. The walls are covered in photographs of teachers and students. A seemingly typical classroom set up in a school. However, upon further inspection of entering the room, a much darker sentiment is revealed. All around you is the configuration of one of the United States' more concealed issues—the school-to-prison pipeline.

For the past month of October at Greensboro Project Space (GPS), a contemporary art center that lies in downtown Greensboro, there has been an interactive art exhibition titled “None of the Above,” that was put on by Hidden Voices, a co-creative collective that sheds light to social issues with the mission of global change.

GPS was created by the School of Art at our very own University of North Carolina at Greensboro. The location is off-campus, which helps to serve not only UNCG students but also the greater community in Greensboro. It is a space that offers students and the community a chance to collaborate and talk about important social issues today. In a greater sense, GPS is an “experimental venue” that is used for many cross-collaborative events, such as the one that took place in the month of October.

The “None of the Above” exhibition examined the dynamics surrounding the U.S. school-to-prison pipeline and the catalysts that create this issue. The school-to-prison pipeline is the pervasive occurrence of youth being funneled through the public school system into juvenile detention centers and/or prisons. This trend particularly and significantly affects youth of color, LGBTQ youth, impoverished youth and youth who live in homes with abuse and/or neglect.

“This project came about when [Hidden Voices] was working with a project in DC to make a national grassroots network about the school-to-prison pipeline, which looks at the disciplinary actions in the school system to see how it relates to incarceration,” says Adam Carlin, who is currently the Director of GPS and Program Director for the Community Arts Collaborative, one of the organizations that helped sponsor the event.

In the interactive exhibition, many items were placed upon the desks to give visitors insight into the pipeline. On one of the classroom desks held statistics and actual North Carolina

Court of Justice juvenile delinquent petition papers, and on them read the different reasons students were detained. “Bumped SRO officer,” “used profanity,” “missed trash can” and “talked back to teacher” were some of the reasons listed.

One slip of paper on a desk read the statistic, “In one North Carolina county, black students were 250 percent more likely to be suspended for attendance than white students,” illustrating the racial disparities within the school-to-prison pipeline. Another slip of paper on a piece of artwork on a wall revealed, “Gay and transgender youth are pipelined into the juvenile justice system at disproportionate rates.”

The photographs of teachers and students in this mock classroom that covered the walls had an interesting reason behind them. Glowering expressions on the faces of those photographed gave an insight into teacher-student relationships.

“These are students imitating their worst teachers and teachers imitating their worst students,” Carlin explained. This aspect of the exhibition was done to create empathy among the two parties.

Another special part of the exhibit, on Friday, Oct. 26, was the performance that was done by Hidden Voices. To help substantiate this exhibition and really bring it to life, community members read monologues of what actual people affected by the pipeline had to say.

“They interviewed about 125 people around North Carolina, and for tonight, they collected 20 monologues from people who have experience in the pipeline, so this is former and current inmates, students, teachers, attorneys, judges and community members will be reciting the monologues tonight for the public,” says Carlin. I had the opportunity to read one of the monologues for the audience that night.

During the powerful performance, monologues were read on the different viewpoints within the school-to-prison pipeline. The monologue that I had the chance to read, where I stood in place of a community organizer, stressed the importance of students having an incentive to dream instilled in them.

The speech metaphorically explained how if you discard seeds in a garden without ever even planting them, you'll never know the abundance that they would have grown to become. Having a chance to perform, and hearing these powerful words come from my own voice, made for an even more compelling experience at Friday night's event.

Hidden Voices' month-long exhibition was sponsored by many other organizations as well. "This is a collaborative project from the UNCG Humanities Network and Consortium, the Greensboro Project Space, the College of Visual and Performing Arts, the [Lloyd International] Honors College at UNCG and the Office of Intercultural Engagement at UNCG," explains Jennifer Feather, Ph.D., who is the director of the UNCG Humanities Network and Consortium and a professor at UNCG.

Additionally, there were special thanks given to UNCG's School of Theatre for helping find students for Friday night's event, UNCG's Department of History and Dr. Anne Parsons who gave a lecture at the exhibition Thursday night on mental health and incarceration.

Dr. Feather also noted that Friday night's event was intended to have currently incarcerated individuals perform as well. "There were some folks who were going to be out on a community pass to perform tonight but because of the weather the prison revoked their passes." This was an unfortunate and ironic reminder of the constraints that come with prison.

This poignant exhibition illuminated the complexities of the school-to-prison pipeline in a more intimate way. The interactiveness of the exhibition allowed for a more visceral response from visitors. To be able to sit in one of the arranged desks and listen to audio recordings with the voice of actual students and the stresses that they deal with is an enhanced experience, to say the least. Hidden Voices was able to capture the stories of those affected, and let their voices truly be heard.

For more information on Hidden Voices, their work and vision, check out www.hiddenvoices.org. In addition, to see more of Greensboro Project Space's work and future exhibitions, projects and events, visit www.greensboroprojectspace.com.