

Teens in drug program unveil images that inspire

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Charles Fenech was given a camera and got inspired.

The 16-year-old from Rochester snapped a photo of three crosses on a rocky mound outside a church to symbolize his hope for freedom of religion. A pile of red apples at a grocery store illustrated his hope to feed the hungry.

Fenech and nine other teens in the county's juvenile drug court program took pictures that illustrated their hopes and dreams for America as part of a photography project.

Their work was unveiled to accolades at a reception held April 21 at the Oakland County Executive Office Building.

"There's real talent here," said renowned celebrity photojournalist Linda Solomon as she surveyed the room where colorful pictures hung.

The students were chosen to participate in the project because they had expressed an interest in art or photography. Solomon doled out photography tips and disposable cameras.

The students captured images of signs, people and nature. One boy shot a majestic-looking flagpole. Another student captured a stark image of a solitary park bench on a snowy day.

Solomon and Oakland Circuit judges Edward Sosnick and James Alexander selected the pictures that were shown at the reception. Each student had a photo displayed on a wall, while the photos that the judges liked the best were covered in black fabric and then unveiled individually to applause.

Amanda Silva of Walled Lake took a picture of a sign next to Walled Lake warning polluters to represent her hopes for a cleaner environment.

"Lots of people like to litter on our lake," the 16-year-old said.

Her top-pick photo showed a church sign with the words, "one another." The sign said "Love One Another," but the "love" was cut off in the image.

Alexander said when he first saw the students' photos, the first word that came to mind was "wow." He said he thought the project was a good self-esteem booster. "It gives kids the ability to say, 'Look, I can do this. I'm successful,'" he said. Solomon said the photo project gave the students an avenue to creatively express their emotions. "All of these kids have shared their hearts with us," she said.

Mark Gaissert, a 17-year-old from Commerce Township, took photos that illustrated his hope for shelter for the homeless. He took pictures of a man laying on a piece of cardboard, explaining that he had asked his friend's dad to pose for the photos.

Gaissert, who landed in the drug court after getting in trouble for selling marijuana at school, is in the fourth phase of the drug court program.

"It got me to realize that I had a problem with drugs and alcohol, and I needed help and couldn't do it on my own," he said.

The Oakland County Family-Focused Juvenile Drug Court, also called "Options: The Power to Choose," helps teens struggling with substance abuse learn to make positive choices so they can get and stay on the right track. Participants are referred by probation officers after having had repeated run-ins with the court system for nonviolent offenses. Students participate in 12-step meetings and therapy sessions, and meet regularly with Sosnick, who presides over the drug court.

Sosnick looked proud during the photography unveiling.

"When you see them, it is just amazing," he said.
