

# Creativity CANNED

by J.D. Hardin

*One man's trash is another man's treasure.  
The oft-repeated idiom aptly applies to a  
group of talented students and their teacher  
at Henry County Middle School.*



**I**N MELISSA WOOD'S ART CLASS, NOTHING GOES TO WASTE. Some of the most interesting pieces are composed of items once discarded as something to be picked up on the weekly garbage route. Egg cartons, pizza and cereal boxes, soda cans, scrap lumber, old textbooks – you name it and it is probably being used by students in the class in a creative way.

This all started as a way to save money in light of the many cutbacks education has experienced across the state. What resulted is highly impressionable, eye-pleasing art. Some of the more notable works have drawn the attention of lawmakers all the way in Washington, D.C., and led to grants totaling more than \$5,000 to provide more resources for further creative excellence.

One cannot help but notice the largest fruits of the student's and teacher's labor. The can and cereal box collages capture your attention like rain when the sun is shining; you didn't know something like that was possible. Hours and hours of can carving and box cutting produced these appetizing works of art. For example:

- Presidential portraits may get a makeover soon. Who knew

President Barak Obama would be so fashionable in Coke, Diet Coke, and Coke Zero cans?

A Hispanic Heritage-themed courtyard? That's easy! A collection of approximately 20 varieties of soda cans were crafted to depict a guitarist and interested listener in a picturesque setting.

One can safely assume tribal artists never thought about making a meaningful image out of Pepsi product cans and old bike tires. Amazing fails on the largest scale to fully describe the intricacy of the work and the highly thoughtful planning and crafting required by students and Wood to complete such awe-inspiring art.

In middle school, art is a required course. If a student does not possess an inner Picasso, you would not be able to tell. One look around the room that is adorned in every nook and cranny with student artwork and it is easy to see everyone has some artistic ability, even if it is housed in the tip of their little finger.

Wood estimates that approximately 3,500 students have participated since the beginning of her recycled art projects. This year alone, 700 students in 6th through 8th grades have worked on the various recycled projects.



A teacher at Henry County Middle School for 11 years, Melissa Wood has been in charge of directing the art room since 2007. "The most rewarding part about my job is when students beg to be in my advanced class where we brainstorm and create most of our projects," said Wood. And her students confirm their enthusiasm for more challenges in the advanced class.

"I learned stuff I never even thought I would learn," shared student Leonard Key. "Advanced art is amazing, and I believe that being here is such a privilege." Keith Pittard, another student, shared, "The ideas we come up with are not easy, and we always put our full effort into our art. Never have we given up or done half work with Ms. Wood on our side."

A to-do list of other projects is on the table for the semesters ahead, but the can collages remain a constant. "I will always continue doing the can collages, because they are so beautiful and popular among the community," shared Wood.

Getting middle school kids to focus on any task is a challenge in and of itself. With so many distractions at that age, it is easy to assume that even the most enthused artist in middle school might not always be up to the task at hand. Principal Dr. Kimberly Anderson is quick to point out that in her school's art program, focus and great work are easy to recognize. "Students genuinely love the class," said Anderson. "There are never any problems with students misbehaving."

With so much to share, the walls of the school display some of

the art pieces, and the county office absorbs others. Each one is the culmination of hours and hours of meticulous work and artistic vision. The city of McDonough was so captivated by the outcome of each project that they built large, sturdy easels to showcase the heavy displays.

Ms. Wood knows that each student has individual artistic abilities that can be displayed through a variety of mediums. It's not all about drawing and painting in this class. It's about pushing the creative limits to design eye-catching art; conversation pieces if you will. Anything has the potential to be art; it's all about the vision, the product, and an audience.

One of the greatest lessons and accomplishments for the students comes from an imparting of knowledge by Ms. Wood regarding how to share their work with an audience. It is one thing to create art, but to get to display it in a gallery is even more exciting for the students.

"We were never given this guidance growing up or in school," said Wood. "It is so important to teach these students about displaying and marketing their work, and that is why we have established a studio in Henry County to do just that."

As long as there are objects that no one has an interest in using, Ms. Wood and her students have the creative abilities to repurpose the "trash" and turn it into beautiful "treasure."