Kalamazoo County students are up to something big

by Jeanne Baron
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KALAMAZOO—Kalamazoo County youth are set to create something big next month—something really big.

Two teams of up to 40 students in grades four through eight will be making art for a massive sculpture that celebrates creativity, diversity and community among the county's youth.

A limited number of seats remain open for the free workshops, all of which take place from 12:45 to 4 p.m. Saturdays in the gymnasium of St. Joseph Parish, 930 Lake St. in Kalamazoo.

Registrations are being accepted at bigthinkregistrationonline.org for Group A, which will meet March 8 and 22, and Group B, which will meet March 15 and 29.

The huge temporary vinyl sculpture that the students create will be installed during a multimodal celebration of the arts, community and diversity scheduled for Saturday, May 31 at a prominent location soon to be announced. Called Together Kalamazoo, it also will feature music, dance and poetry that reflect the diversity of creative expression that enriches local life and culture.
University-community partnership

The celebration is being organized by BigThink, an arts, education, science and technology collaborative, and the Lewis Walker Institute for the Study of Race and Ethnic Relations at Western Michigan University. Gus Calbert is serving as project coordinator, and Yolanda Lavender is coordinating the music, dance and poetry program.

"Together Kalamazoo fits perfectly with the 'One Community' foundational theme of the Walker Institute's community engagement work," says Dr. Timothy Ready, director of the Walker Institute. "Through its various community-engaged research and service programs, the institute works to promote understanding and appreciation of diversity and to build more equitable and inclusive communities."

Ready says the Together Kalamazoo workshops aim to enhance students' understanding of themselves and their community through the arts. Ultimately, he says, the participants will build something creative together while learning more about themselves and their interconnections.

Students participating in the workshops will be asked questions about themselves in relation to their family, friends and other people and places they know in the greater Kalamazoo area. In response to those questions, the students will draw and paint images that develop as well as demonstrate their creativity, positive sense of self and appreciation of community. Throughout the process, they will be supervised and guided by teachers and artists from BigThink and the Walker Institute.

About the partners

BigThink is a Kalamazoo-based group of artists, teachers, scientists and technologists that has been creating innovative educational experiences through the arts across the United States and around the world for more than 35 years. The collaborative was co-founded by Lou Rizzolo, WMU professor emeritus of art. Other BigThink leaders include two WMU alumni: Peter Middleton, project director, and Marc Rizzolo, technical/site coordinator.

The Walker Institute's main mission is to engage in research, teaching and service, especially in Michigan and the Midwest, to promote an understanding of race and ethnic relations, an appreciation of the diverse peoples and cultures of the United States, and more equitable and inclusive communities and institutions. The institute was established in 1989 and is named in honor of Dr. Lewis Walker, a chair and professor emeritus of sociology at WMU.

Additional information

Students participating in Together Kalamazoo are expected to attend both of the free workshops scheduled in March for their group. To register a student in grades four through eight to participate, visit bigthinkregistrationonline.org or call the Walker Institute at (269) 387-2141.

For more information, visit the Walker Institute website at wmich.edu/walkerinstitute.