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TEENS LEARN TO FOCUS: Oakland court's experiment puts novices' photos on sale at gallery

November 2, 2007

BY EMILIA ASKARI

FREE PRESS STAFF WRITER

Maggie, a 17-year-old from West Bloomfield, says she started smoking marijuana and getting drunk

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PHOTOS

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when she was 12. Soon she had a criminal record and eventually served a month in juvenile detention.

Instead of planning for prom and applying to college, she got used to failure.

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But then she started to focus.

Now her photographs will be in a special exhibit Monday at the Susanne Hilberry Gallery in Ferndale.

The exhibit, which includes Maggie's photos of a dahlia and some blue glass, aims to help seven Oakland County juvenile offenders.

"I didn't expect this," Maggie said Wednesday. "It'll be exciting. To think that people actually will be buying them."

The teen photographers all have records of nonviolent crimes and histories of substance abuse. In an attempt to turn their lives around, the juvenile drug court launched an experimental art therapy program this summer.

The participants had expressed some interest in the arts. They met as a group for eight weeks with Kathy Schnur, who is getting a master's in art therapy at Wayne State University.

Schnur, 54, of Oxford gave the students disposable cameras and taught them how to frame still-life shots and self-portraits. Then she set them loose.


The photos were so good that the gallery planned the show, which is titled "Learning to Focus." The title resonates with court administrator Corene Munro.

"One of our mantras in drug court is 'Stay focused,'" she said. "We try to give them some insights into themselves as well as into the world. And I am amazed at the pictures they took."



Oakland County's art therapy program for juvenile drug offenders resulted in this photo, "The Music of Your Life," by Chelsea. The photos will be shown Monday at the Susanne Hilberry Gallery in Ferndale.

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"Sometimes these kids can come across as a little rough. Yet here they are taking pictures of ducks and their little cousins and just silly things."

Munro is seeking grants to continue and expand the program next summer.

Judge Edward Sosnick, who has presided over the drug court since its creation about five years ago, was moved by the photos and contacted the gallery.

"One of the things that can turn a young person's life is to find an interest and a success," he said.

"We've tried a lot of things over the years to try and get our kids involved in positive things other than drugs. This photo program is one of the best.

"Their work is terrific. I'm going to buy at least one," Sosnick said. "We're going to ... hope that this positive energy spills over into other areas of their lives."

*The exhibit will be from 5:30 to 8:30 p.m. Monday at the gallery, 700 Livernois. Each photo is \$25, with proceeds going to the artists. Contact **EMILIA ASKARI** at 248-351-3298 or askari@freepress.com.*

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