

EDUCATION, LIFESTYLE, NEWS

RAW ART WORKS GRADUATES MAKE THEIR VOICES HEARD IN CENTRAL SQUARE

BY OKSANA KOTKINA | June 10, 2022



Raw Art Works graduate Sheila Burgos speaks during the graduation ceremony on Friday. (Spenser Hasak)

LYNN — More than \$2.8 million in financial aid for college was raised by 25 seniors who graduated from RAW Art Works studio Friday — 58 percent of which will be first-generation college students.

Most importantly, however, they found their own voice and the realization of its power. They received a symbolic torch from their mentors because of this — individual brushes marking their artistic accomplishments at the Senior Brush Ceremony.

“Wherever your path takes you to, always carry art with you,” said Hebert Labbate, project launch manager.

Labbate said that those symbolical brushes signified that the graduates managed to develop four critical literacies that RAW aimed at developing — sense of identity; self-advocacy, or their own voice; social agency, i.g., the capacity to change the environment around them; and critical dialogue that is the ability to be honest with themselves and the world around them.

“We really believe that everybody has a story to tell, and we offer them infinite ways through the arts to tell their stories, so that they are seen and heard,” said RAW Executive Director and one of its founders Kit Jenkins.

To celebrate the individual voices of their students, the teachers crafted colorful individual brushes for all of their graduates — some of them covered with glitter, some of them simple and elegant, with each brush inscribed with a single word that best distinguished the uniqueness of each student.

Some of the words inscribed on the brushes were “rooted,” “fighter,” “drive,” “resilient,” and “exuberant.” The mentors also wrote short letters for each of their students, stating that “no one deserves the open sky” as much as they do, and that they have much “to offer this world.”

In return, the students also crafted individual brushes for their mentors bearing words such as “bright” and “motivating.” Each student had a personal mentor, and Jenkins said that the studio was trying to select the most appropriate mentor for every student.

One of the mentors and Professional Photographer Kim Indresano said that she met her student virtually every week, and she taught her student time management and helped her find ideas of what to do next in her life.

“Basically, cheerleading, supporting and loving her,” said Indresano.

Parents expressed their gratitude to the mentors and the studio, saying that it was “fantastic and unbelievable,” as Joe Dash, Lynn resident, put it.

Wilfredo Cespedes, Lynn resident, said that all of his daughters went to RAW, and that Friday, when he went to the graduation ceremony for his granddaughter — her sister, who came with them, said that next year she wanted to join RAW too. Cespedes said that the hearts of people must be touched and inspired for them to be able to do great things.

“Your art can really reach the heart,” said Cespedes.

Heidy Ramirez, Lynn resident, thanked the school for helping the immigrant community in Lynn and working with her son every day.

“You worked with him every day and turned him into the man he is today,” said Ramirez. “You changed our family history,” said Ramirez.

Jenkins said that most of the graduating young artists who engaged in painting, sculpture, printmaking, and other arts at RAW for three to 10 years, were going to pursue fields other than art in college, and those fields ranged from psychology, engineering, business, and environment.

RAW is a Creative Youth Development non-profit organization, which is rooted in art therapy, said Jenkins. RAW has five art studios, a digital film program, and a college access and career readiness program. It was established in 1988, and it has been in Lynn for 28 years.

“Thousands of kids have come through our doors,” said Jenkins.

The graduates said that in many ways RAW made them into what they are today and helped them find their own voice and realize that their voices mattered. RAW also helped the kids figure out what they wanted to do in their lives and what was right for them.

“This program helped me to become more of myself and figure out my life path and learn that you don’t have to stick with something forever, and it’s ok to change and move around, because that’s how you find what’s right for you, not what’s just ok,” said Ana Lambiase.

After receiving their brushes at the Senior Brush Ceremony, designed to bring together the graduates, their families, and their mentors, the students will move on to the next step in their lives.

“Next step is a different path for all of you,” said Coryn Matheison, project launch coordinator.

Kaitlyn Farmer, community engagement manager, said that being a RAW alumna herself, she knew that it was a very special community, and that was why she was still there today.

“A lot of you are breaking barriers,” said Farmer.

For those who want to break the barriers too, RAW currently has open enrollment for its summer programming and all of it is free. For more information, please visit <https://www.rawartworks.org>.

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