

Youth Art Contest provides young people greater voice in addressing violence

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When discussing youth violence prevention, too often the voices of those most impacted are left out of the conversation: young people themselves. The [Center for Youth Equity](#) (CYE) within the [Violence Prevention Institute](#) at Tulane University School of Public Health and Tropical Medicine strives to change that by involving youth in research, community organizing, and advisory councils on how to make their neighborhoods and schools safe, supportive spaces where they can thrive. A barrier still exists for involving young people who did not have the time or inclination to be involved in these more formal methods of change. To engage with a wider

audience and lower the barriers for involvement in youth violence prevention, CYE launched the Youth Art Contest (YAC) in 2022.

The YAC examines violence prevention through a strengths-based lens, using themes that highlight protective factors against violence. “The contest is a fantastic opportunity for the VPI to understand new perspectives from young people and help guide our violence prevention efforts,” says Dr. Katherine Theall, director of the Violence Prevention Institute.

From August to October, artists between the ages of 11 – 21 from the greater New Orleans area submit original artwork on a theme and how it relates to violence prevention for them. No entry fee is required, and all mediums of two-dimensional art are accepted. Awards include a grand prize of \$500, five best in age group prizes of \$125, and eight honorable mentions. *(Top left is a digital art submission by Christian Jackson, 15, who received an Honorable mention for their work).*

The response to the launch of the 2022 Youth Art Contest was incredibly moving. Twenty-three artists submitted work, with a wide variety of techniques and interpretations including, photo collage, digital art, color pencil, oil paint, acrylic paint, and black and white sketches. The artists touched on topics of mental health, feminism, accessibility, music, politics, education, sexual orientation, and many more.

The winner of the 18-21 age group, Kendrik James, 21, explained that his piece, “Men Are Human Too” *(Top right)* is about liberation from toxic masculinity. The young black man is removing the tape that symbolizes the abusive teachings that trap men into believing that they cannot show weakness of any kind, including loving openly and expressing their emotions. He is liberating himself of the confinement that toxic masculinity has taught him by speaking his emotions while tears fall to show his pain. The hands on his shoulders capture the warm support and understanding of loved ones for his moment of weakness, reminding him he is no less of a “man” and that he is human.” After the contest, Ken was recognized for his other work in the WGNO article “This Steinway shuffles around New Orleans”.

The 2022 grand prize winner, Khalil McKnight, 17, entered a moving piece *(Center)* on his relationship with his hair. In his description of his work, he wrote that, “My hair is a way of self-expression; awkwardly unknotting every follicle and overlapping each loc eventually molds the two strand twists. I initially decided to grow out my

hair to combat my anxiety, using it to cover my eyes from my surroundings. Years later, I realized the troubles that came with my younger self's innocent decision: constantly being racially profiled and discriminated against, forced to endure an even greater fear.” Khalil’s hard work and artistic talent paid off later that year when he was named a U.S. Presidential Scholar in Arts.

The competition culminates in a gallery exhibition. The 2022 event was held at the Diboll Gallery at Tulane’s Tidewater Building, where the artists and their friends and family viewed the pieces, attended an award ceremony where the winners were announced, and enjoyed some food and drink as well as connection with one another. While the art contest itself allowed unique youth voices to speak out on the issues they felt most strongly about in regard to violence, the exhibition allowed these messages to be heard by the community. Art is an incredible tool for promoting cohesion and creating a physical and emotional safe space. See all the art submitted in the 2022 YAC in a virtual exhibit on the VPI Youth Art Contest page: <https://violenceprevention.tulane.edu/youth-art-contest>

Submissions for this year's Youth Art Contest are open until November 1st. This year’s theme is “Culture”, asking artists to depict what makes them feel like they belong, inspires them, and supports them. Artists are welcome to interpret the word in any way that feels most meaningful to them. For more details on eligibility and submission instructions, visit that same link in the paragraph above.