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# Students, teachers deck the doors, halls at W-SR Middle School in display of holiday creativity

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Sprucing up spaces and sparking spirits are some of the fun tasks that come with the arrival of the holidays.

But whose job is it exactly to do this?

And is a fun task really a job?

Is it an impulse that propels itself into the caveats of the calendar and makes us take a look back at the old year, then face forward into the new, ready to turn a new page?

The students and teachers at Waverly-Shell Rock Middle School may have their own answers to these questions but instead of using class time to figure them out, they put on their artistic caps and rolled up their sleeves.

Hence, the resulting Decking Out the Halls initiative, an immersion into collaborative creativity one can only experience walking through the school and marveling at its display of over two dozen decorated classroom doors.

The students and the teachers took ownership of their space with the goal of spreading the joy of the season like they have never done before.

In fact, they may have started a new tradition similar to the Festival of Trees or other community holiday display sites like the magnificent Christmas tree at the Waverly City Hall or Santa's house in Kohlmann Park.

Except that they tried a new approach collaborating with each other, breaking down the difference between the customary and the new, acting on the knowledge that it takes the former to appreciate the latter.

At the invitation of the school, I perused the transformed hallways in the company of Annalise Weber, 11, Makyia Djoumessi, 10, Harper Morrison, 11, Nathan Skibinski, an eighth grader, and Daniel Roth, 12.

They may be middle schoolers grade-wise, but their wisdom and hosting skills, cultivated by a program called Leader in Me, are easily comparable to those of professional guides.

Randomly assembled by Principal Jeremy Langner to take me around the halls, the kids modeled what they had learned in real time—they were courteous and kid-like at once, with a sense of self awareness and respect for others that prompted them, even in this unscripted situation, to take turns explaining the designs on the doors.

They told me that during their usual duties as school ambassadors they love to take parents and prospective students around the school and brag about the learning that takes place there.

A walk through the hallways of the school, where kinetic energy has its own fifth-through-eighth-graders formula, ignites the senses and lights up smiles not just of the

casual visitors but also keeps the mood festive and yes, fanfare-like.

The otherwise nondescript brown classroom doors now brim with colors, shapes and designs reflecting the celebratory spirit in anticipation of the holidays and of the upcoming winter break.

Turned into display spaces, they now showcase mixed media art work, telling the stories of the students and the subjects they learn about in the classroom.

Exploring the doors exhibit is not just a soul fest but also a great exercise activity, adding steps to the fitbit, while filling the heart with lighthearted fun fuel and joy.

Perhaps most notably, the exploratory walk offers a mind rest from the clickable world we inhabit.

Looking at each door, reading the teachers names and their specialties is a refreshing way to get to know the learning community at the school.

Take for instance the classrooms where Mrs. Ann Brown and Mrs. Heidi Thor, the special ed associates, teach.

There, a snow-covered display splashed across the door and the adjacent walls, features three snow creatures smiling under a sign that says "Chillin' with my Snowmies."

Then, there's the impressive snow castle of math and science teachers Mrs. Beverly Anderson and Mrs. Jessica Hass that also covers both doors. Two inviting signs atop each door ask visitors to "come chill" with the classes of the two teachers, creating hesitation in the mind of a time-trapped guest which one to pick.

Some doors, like Mrs. Holly Armstrong's classroom, feature mixed media art — pictures of students are pasted atop the bodies of skiers and skaters, cutouts of pine trees and cotton create a mountain winter scene with a ski lift on the left.

The cold emanating from that scene contrasts with another scene pictured on Mrs. Tara Soesbe's door. An instructional strategist, Mrs. Soesbe has shown an artistic preference for cups of cocoa, emphasizing coziness and comfort in the thick of winter.

Mrs. Nicole Kramer, who happened to be in her classroom during my tour, opened the door and acquiesced to pose next to it with my guides. It was fitting because in the display Mrs. Kramer plays Santa Claus.

Once we got to the second floor next to the big window overlooking the communal space below, where fifth-graders happened to be taking their lunch at the moment, the vibe of the place spiked.

A wave from Makyia prompted a big wave from the kids below, matching, if not in purpose or numbers, but surely in enthusiasm, the now famous Hawkeye wave, the ritual of fans at Kinnick



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**Above: Student ambassador gave this editor a tour of the halls. There was a lot to see around the middle school as the transformations of the doors into panels for artistic expression spread cheer. Here, Nathan Skibinski, an eighth-grader, takes a break as his fellow student, Annalise Weber, 11, leads a tour of the school doors on a recent Friday. Right: Mrs. Nicole Kramer, who happened to be in her classroom, opened the door and acquiesced to pose next to it. In this display, Mrs. Kramer plays Santa Claus.**

Stadium waving collectively at the University of Iowa Stead Family Hospital patients to cheer them on.

Keeping up with the tour, we moved on, but not before someone asked me to help pick the top three door displays. At first, I was up to the task, then, looking at the variety and enterprise that went into every endeavor, I quietly excused myself from that assignment as sometimes it is impossible to rank order what you appreciate.

What was most precious to me as I walked the halls and admired the exhibits, was learning as much about the teachers as I did about my young hosts.

It was clear that they were a good team.

My new friends represented themselves in ways that would make any parent smile. They spoke with enthusiasm and eloquence about loving to be ambassadors for the school.



Their actions showed it that morning. They wanted to make a difference and make the transition from elementary to middle school less overwhelming for new students, they said.

The decoration of the halls was just one such opportunity to show

school spirit.

"I like being surrounded by a group of people," Makyia said, summing, aptly, her fellow ambassadors' thoughts.

"I like being around them."

More photos on page 7.



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**Above: Mrs. Tara Soesbe also happened to open the door and at the request of this editor, posed with the kids. Left: The classroom where Mrs. Ann Brown and Mrs. Heidi Thor teach is now a snow-covered scene.**