

# Van Go apprentice artists create 12 essential needs pantries in lieu of traditional benches



photo by: Doug Stremel

Van Go apprentice artist Neka titled her essential needs pantry, "Lots of Joy."

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Van Go apprentice artists were not able to create their traditional benches this summer because of the COVID-19 pandemic and the outside collaboration the project requires, so instead, they designed 12 essential needs pantries that they hope will help community members in need.

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It was a project that fit well into what the artists had been learning about earlier in the year.

“This spring, prior to the outbreak of COVID-19, our youth were involved in research and creative exercises surrounding the topic of food insecurity in the community while creating a mural for Just Food,” Art Director Rick Wright said in a press release. “While that topic was immediately relatable to our population of young people, the growing wave of additional insecurities (amid) the current pandemic demonstrated an exponential need for even more basic necessities throughout our community.”

Van Go is an arts-based social service agency that employs at-risk youth between the ages of 14-24. The 12 artists who created the pantries were between the ages of 14 and 18.

The pantries are large, with boxes that are 24 inches wide and 13 inches deep, and should be able to fit a variety of needs such as clothing, nonperishable foods, toiletries and more.

Ayana, one of the artists, said she’s seen Little Free Libraries across town and has always thought they were “neat and cute.” (It is the policy of Van Go not to provide the last names of its students.) She said it was great to create something a little bit bigger than those libraries this summer that will help the community.

Ayana's design is called "The Evening Lights," and she said she wants people to look at the celestial imagery on her pantry and feel a sense of tranquility.



photo by: Doug Stremel

Van Go apprentice artist Ayana designed her essential needs pantry with celestial images and called it, "The Evening Lights."

"I wanted to spread the message of the beauty of the world that we live in," Ayana said, adding that "what we put into (the world) is what we give back."

Eliza Darmon, Van Go's development director, said this project was special because the artists came up with the designs on their own. Themes included a magical forest, a fairytale and leaves blowing in the wind. One artist described their design as "a bunch of abstract bugs and flowers livin' and lovin'."

The artists were physically distant as they worked on Van Go's art floor. Each had their own art supplies and an iPad for research and sketching.

"We made it through the whole six-week session without having to shut down," Darmon said. "For us, if we can have the youth on site with an abundance of cautionary measures in place, that is preferable."

That's because in addition to working on their projects, the artists receive social work services, a healthy lunch, life skills and healthy living lessons.



photo by: Doug Stremel

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Van Go apprentice artist Ian created a space-themed essential needs pantry called “Spaced Out.”

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In-person programming “is the most effective and interactive way to develop a rapport and trusting relationship with the youth we serve,” Wright said in the press release. “We thrive when we are able to provide our participants with the immediate feedback, training, and support they need on a daily basis while continuing to provide a physical safe space that often feels like a second home.”

If the program had to be shut down because of the pandemic, artists would have been able to take the pantries home. This was one of the reasons the pantry project was preferable to the “Benchmark” project, which had been the tradition for over 20 years.

The bench program also requires the artists to collaborate with clients, and Darmon said Van Go made a pact with the artists that no outside people could come into their work space. Benches that were supposed to be created for clients this summer will be moved to the summer of 2021.

Darmon hopes the essential needs pantries will be spread throughout different parts of Lawrence, in both residential and business areas.

The pantries will be on sale later this summer, but Darmon prefers to call the purchase an “adoption,” because “you pay for it and then you care for it.”

In the press release, Wright said, “In the spirit of the free lending library movement, the future stewards of these mini pantries will ensure they are stocked and accessible so anyone can give what they can ... and take what they need.”

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