

AFRICAN BURYING GROUND ART



Jerome Meadows of Savannah, Georgia, sculptor of the African Burying Ground Memorial, stands with Vernis Jackson, founder of the Seacoast African American Cultural Center and burying ground committee chair, while at Portsmouth Middle School this week, working with students and helping them to make tiles that will be implemented in the new memorial. PHOTO BY RICH BEAUCHESNE

A lasting impression

Memorial project sculptor guides students' contributions to project

By Jesse Scardina

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PORTSMOUTH — Eighth-grader Becca Ingwersen spent Thursday morning making her permanent mark on the culture of the city.

So did classmates Grace Goddard, Ratana Ryan and Tariq Abdelsadek and 84 other eighth-graders, as they worked meticulously on designing tiles that will help decorate the memorial on the African Burying Ground,

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Use the SMG Shine app to see sculptor Jerome Meadows work with Portsmouth Middle School students. For instructions, see A3.

BURYING

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unearthed in downtown Portsmouth in 2003.

The decade-plus, \$1.2 million project is nearing completion, with a spring 2015 date of a reburial ceremony. The public art memorial, designed by Savannah, Ga.-based artist Jerome Meadows, will be installed. Meadows, who was at Portsmouth Middle School Thursday watching the students design the tiles using Ghanaian-based art, which included Adinkra symbols and Kente patterns, saw an opportunity in his design to include art developed by the community.

"It was a way of giving the younger generation a stake in the project," Meadows said.

The eighth-graders were making designs that would be laminated and fired onto a tile by Meadows. The interpretation was left up to the students, Meadows said, but there was some guidance. "It's about using the symbol and colors as a language," he said. "Think about what the Adinkra symbol means and use colors to compliment that. You don't want them to be competing."



Jerome Meadows, sculptor of the African Burying Ground memorial, works with eighth-graders at the Portsmouth Middle School including: from left to right Ratana Ryan, Tariq Abdelsadek, Becca Ingwersen and Grace Goddard on their tile project to be implemented in the African Burying Ground memorial.

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It was up to the students to decide whether to include an Adinkra symbol, like Ratana Ryan did with the fawohodie symbol, which means independence, or to work with a Kente pattern, with each color having its own meaning, like Becca Ingwersen's tile.

"I liked the idea of bringing together all the Earth colors," Ingwersen said, pointing to purple and blue,

which stand for the Earth and sky, respectively.

Anna Nuttall, one of Portsmouth Middle School's art teachers, said the project has been an educational, thought-provoking and enlightening experience for the students — especially with the added benefit of having Meadows speak with them.

"His first class with them it almost brought tears to my eyes," Nuttall said. "He

talked about the power of art and what public art is, and one student said 'Public art is like public speaking,' and another said 'Yes, except it's always there.'"

The discovery of the burial ground has been implemented into different parts of the curriculum, as art teachers discuss public art and African-inspired art, while science teachers look at the geology of the location off Court and

State streets, and social studies teachers discuss the heritage and history of Africa and its diverse countries.

"The students are the ones that will be carrying on this community," said Vernis Jackson, chair of the Committee on the African Burial Ground. "After spending so much time raising money for this project, to see it coming to fruition, to see this and the kids and how involved they are in this, it almost brings you to tears."

Once the students finish designing and making their tiles, the colorful and poignant designs will be shipped to Meadows in Savannah, where he will digitally upload each one — so that if anything were to happen to any tiles, the artwork would be available — before using a special technique that will allow the image to be laminated onto a ceramic tile, which will be fired in a kiln that will impose the artwork onto the tile.

The pattern of the 112 tiles will be decided by Meadows, who is hoping to pair up an Adinkra tile with a Kente counterpart. The tiles will be placed along the back railing of the memorial park and is expected to be unveiled next spring.