CHALKING IT UP

Artist Uses Hopscotch To Raise Child Abuse Awareness

Posted: June 21, 2014
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HARRISONBURG — As Atlanta artist Jessica Caldas drew dozens of hopscotch grids around Court Square — one for each new child client within the past year at the Collins Center and Center for Child Advocacy in Harrisonburg — many passers-by kept walking without much of a second glance.

Without stopping to ask what she was doing, spectators couldn’t possibly be expected to recognize the link between the art installation and the often hidden or ignored problem of child abuse. Caldas pointed out the connection between people’s attitudes toward her project and the kids it represents.

“Very few people have stopped to ask me what I’m doing, which I think is a little interesting because I’m sitting here drawing hopscotch squares,” she said. “A lot of people just walk right over it, or walk right by, and conceptually, if you think about the way we interact with these very difficult ideas and issues, there’s a connection there. The way we sort of ignore these things we know are happening constantly, next door, in our neighborhood, down the street, whatever.”

Caldas is in Harrisonburg for a three-week program at the Old Furnace Artist Residency, which invites out-of-town artists to leave their mark on Harrisonburg with social justice-focused projects.

In Atlanta, Caldas usually works with printmaking, so here in Harrisonburg she held a survivors’ arts workshop to teach survivors of sexual and domestic violence how to carve linoleum blocks. She’s also been interviewing survivors and advocates here for projects she plans to do later, once she’s back.
home.

The more than 150 hopscotch grids are the third part of her project, and she started drawing them Friday morning, expecting they would cover all the sidewalk space around Court Square. She’ll be continuing her work today, and it will stay there until rain washes it away.

The hopscotch squares contain demographic symbols about the children they represent. There’s no personal information about any of the victims, but the squares show whether the child was male or female, the child’s ethnicity, symbols Caldas created to show the relationship between the victim and the perpetrator and Roman numerals depicting the age of the child and whether the perpetrator was over or under 18.

She picked hopscotch to display the Collins Center’s data because of its young, playful nature and the ease with which children can draw it.

“It’s nice because this is not obtrusive, it’s not heavy-handed,” she said. “It’s not going to be in people’s face in a way that’s negative, even though this is obviously a heavy and sad thing to consider. … Because it’s not heavy-handed or sensationalistic in the way that some work around this can be, I feel like it’s actually more honest and more approachable.”

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