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A Painting of Youth Empowerment in Local Community Development

Iron County is a rural county of approximately 6000 people located in Northern Wisconsin, and consistently ranks as one of the counties with the highest unemployment and average age rates (i.e., impoverished and elderly). Since 2012 the Iron County University of Wisconsin Extension (UWEX) office has implemented a multidisciplinary programming approach in order to effectively engage young people in community development. Research indicates that communities that value and create space for young people to be active agents of change increases the likelihood that young people will have positive community connections and innovative leadership skills. Strong engagement in community health and development projects inhibit cycles of poverty by empowering (young) residents to combine their local knowledge with the resources necessary to implement sustainable change.

Amy Nosal, AmeriCorps VISTA with Iron County UWEX, has encouraged the young residents of Hurley to engage in community development since the summer of 2013. Building upon relationships she established with the Hurley School and other local community partners, she ended her 2nd year of service with a youth mural project in the downtown area. The mural stands as a visual representation of local youth’s hopes and dreams for the future of their hometown, and involved a process of knowledge and idea sharing between science and art students. The mural was well received by the community, as indicated by its front page coverage in the local newspaper.



HURLEY ART students, from left, Karissa Recla, Hope Worthington, Catelyn Nelson and Jackie Vinopal work on a mural Tuesday at the base of one of the railroad bridges that span the Montreal River.

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In her 1st year of service Nosal worked with Hurley students to design potential layouts for an upcoming trailhead in the downtown Hurley area. Students visited the site, collected community input about desired features of the trailhead, and shared their designs to the larger community. It gave the upcoming trailhead additional community attention and encouraged the City of Hurley to further its development.

After school let out in the spring of 2014, Nosal combined two different resources to support a second project at the site of the upcoming trailhead. First, she and Diane O’Krongly, the Hurley School science teacher she previously collaborated with, attended the 2014 [G’WOW Teacher Institute](#), a program for educators that demonstrates how to connect students to climate change science by studying the cultural impacts of climate change. G’WOW illustrates how traditional Ojibwe lifestyles (e.g., wild ricing) are impacted by climate change, and its pedagogy encourages students to consider how their lives are, and will be, impacted by climate change. Students are then directed to create activities that proactively mitigate the negative impacts of climate change. Nosal and O’Krongly used the ideas from the G’WOW institute to integrate conversations of climate change into every topic covered in O’Krongly’s eighth grade earth science class in the 2014-2105 school year.

The second resource was the Iron County Health Department’s offer to include Iron County UWEX in a grant focused on improving public options for physical activities in Iron County. Nosal saw this as an opportunity to engage students again in the upcoming Hurley trailhead, and created a partnership among herself, O’Krongly, and Terry Davis, the Hurley art teacher. Together the three educators developed a curriculum in which the topics studied by the earth science students were the inspiration for two of Davis’ art classes as they developed the design of a mural to be painted on a graffiti ridden wall at the trailhead site (see image below). As an example of this knowledge and idea sharing process, after the science students learned about local pollinators (and the climate change implications for) while working on the [National Association of Conservation District’s 2015 poster contest](#), Nosal shared with the art students what the science students learned, and introduced both groups of students to the [Beehive Design Collective](#), a volunteer artist group that shares stories about communities and natural resource issues, using art featuring local ecosystems and species.

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Hurley High School students at the upcoming trailhead site

At the center of the knowledge and idea sharing between the science and the art students was the question “What does a happy and health future for Hurley look like?” As the spring semester progressed, the art students were asked what things in the community they currently enjoy and would like to see continue in the future, and then instructed to draw an image that represented that particular thing. Students drew a range of images, from trees and snow, to local sports and recreational hunting. To help synthesize the individual image, local muralist Ann Marie Batiste was recruited. Batiste later oversaw the painting of the mural as well.

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2015 Hurley youth mural project

The mural developed by the Hurley School students this past spring was not the first youth mural project to occur in downtown Hurley. Just a few blocks away, another mural project was completed in 2008. Two walls face each other across a downtown street, both with images that elementary students, painted as black silhouettes in the foreground, saw when they visited the Iron County Historical Museum. The new mural also boosts a few black silhouettes, but instead of an industrial landscape of the past, the new mural features a colorful landscape with food, music, flowers, trees, and animals. Iron County communities do an admirable job acknowledging their historic roots, but the mural painted this year is significant because it is one of few signs that towns like Hurley, once thriving on logging and mining, are looking towards a new, sustainable future.



2008 Hurley youth mural project

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There were a number of local community partners who supported the mural project. Using the grant funds offered by the Iron County Department of Health, Nosal engaged the local hardware store as the primary source of painting supplies, the City of Hurley and Hurley police to prepare and monitor the wall while the mural was in progress, two local restaurants to supply food while the students painted, and the Hurley School metal and woods shop classes to create various park equipment that will be placed at the trailhead once it is further developed. The final partner, also known as the Northwoods Manufacturing, was particularly meaningful because it was yet another venue to engage students in this particular project.

The Hurley School students who worked with Nosal on the mural project have again served as community leaders in the development of the upcoming trailhead, a green space in the downtown area that will be accessible to all community members. The students analyzed past attitudes and realities in their hometown, compared them to current conditions (including climate change impacts), and - most importantly - imagined more for their community and worked to make it happen. This real world experience is one way AmeriCorps VISTAs, such as Nosal, have shown young people how to become empowered agents of positive change in their communities, and beyond.