



NEON ON 90

RUEDIGER STUDENTS LIGHT UP STUDIES WITH HIGHWAY SIGNS

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Last month, Tallahassee celebrated the 100th anniversary of the local convention that helped initiate the Old Spanish Trail. This road sign was a reaction to the automobile boom of the early 1900s and it capitalized on travelers seeking adventure. The highway would eventually stretch from St. Augustine to San Diego and would create the east-west thoroughfare known in our area as Highway 90.



As the tourism industry grew, businesses competed for customers with eye-catching, roadside signage. The brighter and more theatrical, the better. With the popularity of incandescent lights, signs began to flicker on all across the country and when the Old Spanish Trail officially opened in 1929, neon signage was just beginning to become a fixture of advertising in America.

"I love old signs," said Katharyn Jones, art teacher at Ruediger Elementary School. In an effort to commemorate the Old Spanish Trail in her art class, Jones began researching signage and she developed a brilliant lesson for her third- and fourth-grade students. First, she provided the historic context for the lesson. She dug through archives and old photographs to show her students what Highway 90



PHOTOS BY AMANDA THOMPSON
TOP: Ruediger students created neon colored letters for the project on road signs. ABOVE: Katharyn Jones helps Brenton Rucker thread a string through his letter.

would have looked like several generations ago.

"We focused on the Florida portion of the highway from Jacksonville to Pensacola Beach. We looked at all kinds of signs and a lot of them were neon or marquee so that's what we focused on."

The classes all watched videos that illustrated how neon signs are made. "We watched how they bend the glass tubes and what gases are put into them to make what colors." Narrowing the scope, Jones then began concentrating on the local and contemporary connections.

Jones isolated letters from signs that can currently be found along Highway

90. "I picked a mix of local businesses and chains. Publix is corporate but we feel connected to it, that's our grocery store."

Jones challenged students to guess where each letter had originated from. "Taco Speak, Chubby's Chicken, Guthrie's, Waffle House. When they see letters from signs that they recognize, they freak out. Some were harder than others like Bethel, Four Points by Sheraton, Mr. Roboto, U-Haul, and Walgreens. By the end, they're so charged up, they're practically screaming the letters."

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Neon signs

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Jones was able to sustain this level of enthusiasm for the project by utilizing tools and materials purchased with an Arts Education Grant from the Council on Culture & Arts. The students selected a letter and recreated it in clay. Once fired in the kiln, the letters were finished by hand with neon and glow-in-the-dark acrylic paints.

Signs are inherently visual but are generally not considered art even though there is a considerable amount of design incorporated into the typography, graphics and construction. The artists and craft-people who created the signs of yesteryear were highly skilled and theirs is a dying breed.

"Signage today looks a little cold because a lot of it is so flat and printed up in a way that's not as hands-on as it might have been in the past. We took modern letters that were probably digitally created and we gave them the old school treatment. Students have more of a connection now. Even though it's the Publix 'P,' it's been rebranded by the student and it has become their own letter now. It's not just representing that brand, it's representing them," explained Jones.

Nearly 200 students created a letter in Jones' art class and they all made personal choices ranging from which letter they wanted to work with to the way they constructed and decorated it. Fourth-grader Tanner Kail and her classmates reflected on their experience and what they learned. "You have to work fast so the clay doesn't get dry," Tanner explained. "It will harden and you won't be able to work with it."

Raymond Zheng chose the letter "Z from Auto-Zone" and he shared that his favorite part of the project was selecting colors and painting. Brenton Rucker agreed and added "I chose green because it's my favorite color. I also threw in some red."

Sophia Cuevas "used a bunch of colors because why would you paint with just one?" Briana Douglas has plans for her letter "B" once she gets it home. "I'm going to ask if I can hang it over my door."

This sense of ownership and pride is the best possible outcome for Jones who said "one of the things I was really targeting is tapping into the students' sense of community.

Highway 90 is their road and these are their signs. They're for them and, yes, they're advertising but someone got paid to make that art that people see every day. It's part of our experience in Tallahassee. It's important to acknowledge that history, acknowledge its usefulness, and pay homage to it."

Amanda Karioth Thompson is the Assistant Director for the Council on Culture & Arts. COCA is the capital area's umbrella agency for arts and culture (www.tallahasseearts.org).



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Ruediger fourth-graders retrieve their letters for finishing.



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Kathryn Jones gives the students a review of the Neons Along 90 art lesson.