

# *Tiles and talent combine in growth project for youth*

By Kim Farrell *Staff writer*



**CREATING, CONSTRUCTING, CONTRIBUTING** — Students from the Rome Tutorial Center, Cheyenne Johnson, left, and Brittany Riggleman, right, get instruction from Shelley Turner, of Turner Glass Art, in making ceramic tiles. The colorful tiles will be used to decorate concrete planting boxes along W. Liberty St. Turner came up with the idea of the community service project as a way that students can learn the art of mosaics, and use their creativity in a constructive way to contribute to the community. (Sentinel photo by John Clifford)

**E**ver notice those sidewalk planters along West Liberty Street?

Well come summer, they will be hard to miss.

The concrete-walled containers hold a tree, with some seasonal flowers occasionally added. Thanks to a community project showcasing student's artistic creativity, however, soon the "pots" will begin to be transformed from drab to dazzling with colorful mosaic tiles.

The work is the result of a program developed by Shelley Turner of Turner Glass Art, of Rome. Called "Untapped," the program's mission is "to provide area youth with new skills enabling them to create a community art project, thereby giving them a sense of purpose and a positive connection to their community."

Based on similar projects funded by the U.S. Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention, Untapped is offering a creative outlet to students who attend the Rome Tutorial Center.

"I approached Rome City School District with my idea and they have allowed me to work with the youth who attend the Rome Tutorial Center" in the former St. Peter's school, Turner said. "The students who attend the center have had issues regarding the code of conduct at their home schools and have been placed at an

alternative school setting for a limited period of time.”

“Every community can benefit from the energy, creativity and commitment of young people who represent largely ‘untapped’ resources, (who are) very much in need of being needed,” Turner said. She cites a research study by the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching, which found that it costs between \$900 and \$1,100 annually to provide one child with non school arts programming; and it costs between \$36,000 and \$100,000 annually to pay for a youth in trouble.

“When we first met with the kids they weren’ t all that excited,” Turner said. “I don’ t think they really understood it all. But, once they started to work with the clay they began trying to recruit their friends. They come every week like clockwork so I guess they enjoy it. I think it will all sink in at the time of installation. That is when they will see it all come together.” The idea of decorating the nine oversize planters came to Turner as a result of her appreciation of other beautification projects in the city.

“In my travels to City Hall I noticed the planters,” she explained. “I love the way the city does plantings all over and I thought with a little color those planters and the trees would look even better.”

Turner said that she felt this would be the perfect project to get the students involved in. She saw it as “a way they could make a positive contribution to their community and have something to be proud of.”

Turner said that she found total support and enthusiasm from the school district when she approached them with her idea . “I wrote to Tom Gallagher to introduce myself, and to tell him my idea for a program. He hooked me up with Jeff Simon who got me in touch with Bob Jones, the coordinator of the program at Rome Tutorial Center. Bob told me to write out a list of materials and supplies I would need. He put the order right through and within a month we started the program.”

Covering the planters with colorful ceramic tiles is no small undertaking. There are a total of nine planters, with a total of 240 square feet to be covered, requiring over 1,728 individual tiles. The entire project will be provided at no cost to the city, with funding of materials and supplies being donated by the school district and Turner. The value of the project is estimated to be over \$17,000, Turner said.

“I donate my time and my friends Mary Constabile and Tracy Nimey donate their time also,” Turner said. “The tools and the clay we used to teach were paid for by the school district. I am donating the cost for the glazes we will use in the planter project.”

Turner said that the community improvement project was also well received by city officials. “I approached the resign committee of the Main Streets Alliance with my design in August 2006 and they overwhelmingly loved it,” Turner said. “I then wrote to the mayor for his support and asked that he submit legislation to the

Common Council to accept the donation. He loved the idea and the Common Council approved it on November 8, 2006.”

The students meet with Turner once a week for about two hours. The program is conducted in two phases: the first phase is the learning process - learning the skills and techniques of a ceramic/mosaic artist while learning to work as a team; the second phase is the completion of the community art project .

“The students will be take part in all aspects of the project,” Turner said, “including design planning, presentation process, creation of the art piece, photography, writing press releases, installation of the art piece, and planning and execution of a public unveiling of their work.”

“Presently we have four students attending RTC who are working on the community art project. We had a few more but they have since returned to their home schools. Last year we had more than twenty students come through the program,” Turner said. Some of the former students who worked on the project include Rob Nelson, Kelly Schuh, Christine Maxfield and Aaron Woods.

“In the beginning we just concentrated on learning about working with clay bodies, slab rollers, and glazes, but now we are into the actual production of tiles to be used in the final artwork,” Turner said.

Cheyenne Johnson, a Strough seventh grade student, said she decided to get involved with the art project because, “It seemed fun.” Johnson says that her favorite part is getting to play with the clay. Brittany Riggleman, a Strough eight grade student, says that learning the art of creating mosaic tiles is “a new experience” for her. Riggleman said that she is excited to be able to work on this community project. “I know it’ s going to be there for many years,” she explained about the tiles they are creating.

The artwork is only part of the project. Community involvement and support are also necessary to make the student’ s efforts pay off. There will be publicity, installation and then the planning for the “grand unveiling.”

“We are trying to give them a real hands-on experience,” Turner said, “Make it fun but also show them the business side of art.”

Riggleman said that one of the best things about staying busy with the tile work is that “it keeps me out of trouble.” Johnson heartily agreed. The girls said that they are really looking forward to seeing their work displayed for the public, and plan to attend the grand unveiling of the first planter with their families and friends.

The community is also being “tapped” to help with the project. Letters have been

sent to 100 community leaders asking that they submit a design for one of the tiles. Although the main leaf design of the mosaic will remain the same for all planters, the smaller tiles surrounding the leaves can be in any type design imaginable. Johnson and Riggleman said that creating new and interesting designs for the tiles is one of their favorite parts of the project.

When Turner relocated to the Rome area in 2004, she decided to develop her former ceramics hobby into a business. She began selling her work on-line, and then opened a studio and classroom on North George Street, which she worked from for about eight months. Her new studio will be located above Spressos, at 307 N. James St.

“I am very happy to be able to rent space above Spressos,” Turner said. “We have lots of plans! We want to offer summer programs for kids in addition to our adult workshops.” Turner said that some of her former students at the Rome Tutorial Center are interested in continuing to help with the project at the studio on their own time.

Turner credits her mentor, Dorothy Paulin, executive director of the Martin Luther King Cultural Center in Beacon, N.Y., for instilling in her the desire to show youth how their creativity can serve the community. “I was a program director for MLK’s after school/summer program and learned so much from her (Paulin) about giving back to the community and developing programs for youth,” Turner said. She also wanted to acknowledge Constabile and Nimey, of Spressos, for all their help with this project.

Turner said that she would love to see the Untapped program develop into something permanent for all of the youth in the community.

“I am trying to get a non-profit agency to take us under their wing,” Turner said. “My dream is for the kids to have a dedicated space or building where they can create their own opportunities for art-related businesses. I especially want this for the so-called at-risk youth in our community.”

**To find out more about the project, go to [www.turnerglassart.com/community](http://www.turnerglassart.com/community)**



**MOCKUP** — In this artist's rendering, mosaic tiles give the plain concrete planters a whole new look