

ARTS & ENTERTAINMENT

Npt. school hosts first plein air paint out, poetic retreat

By Meakalia Previch-Liu
mea@leelanaunews.com

Northport Public School hosted its first Plein Air Painting and Poetic Retreat on May 8 at the Platte River in Sleeping Bear Dunes National Lakeshore. The district's 28 high school and eighth grade art students had the chance to participate in the all-day immersive outdoor experience along with professional guest artists, poets, and photographers from across the region.

Jen Evans, Northport art teacher, organized the plein air outing and schedule, starting students with sketching and observational painting using viewfinders and easels, and later progressing to finished acrylic paintings that "emphasize composition, color theory, and atmospheric perspective." In the afternoon, poet and author Anne-Marie Oomen guided students in writing reflective poetry inspired by their artwork, with the day concluding in an outdoor gallery-style critique where students shared both their paintings and poems.

Traverse City based visual artist Logan Hudson was one of the visiting creators on site for the day. In the morning, Hudson helped students set up some of the French easels that he brought over, then later worked on his own piece before walking around to view and assist students in the

field. He said working from life and in nature gives people the chance to take in everything around them while not being distracted, but rather, inspired by what's happening in front of them.

"You're hearing the birds, you're feeling the wind, and all of that goes into the painting," Hudson said. "This is a very difficult thing to do because you're kind of out in the elements and there's going to be people watching you paint and you get self-conscious — it's not easy, but it's rewarding."

Hudson said he's been working in the field as an artist for about seven years now, adding that he started just after high school. While in high school and middle school, Hudson said it's a good time to explore art ventures and to think about the possibilities of what you can pursue in life, including art.

"I wish I would have had this opportunity in high school and I think it's so cool that they're learning things that I didn't learn till a few years later after high school," he said. "Whether it's for a living or not, it's a great skill to have and it connects you to nature. Once you finish that painting, whether it's successful or not, it's always going to bring you back to those memories from that time."

Northport senior Haylie Spears, like other kids on loca-

tion, began her art piece with a thumbnail-sized sketch utilizing guidance from Evans on how to find good composition for paintings. She said it was her first time trying out plein air and loved being able to travel to a location like the Platte River to complete their work. Another student, sophomore Shelby Worlow, incorporated natural elements into her painting, sprinkling sand over some of the wet paint on her canvas to add texture and make it more realistic.

"I think this is important for kids to experience because, especially out in Northport, kids don't really get opportunities like this, so this has been great," Spears said.

Leelanau artist Kat Dakota said the opportunities that Evans creates through her various projects and events inspire not only the students, but also the adult artists involved as the discussions go beyond materials and techniques.

"Seeing the energy, fearlessness and exploratory minds of young artists sparks my creativity and bravery," Dakota said in a written statement. "I encourage students to embrace these attitudes. Discipline is critical in being a professional artist, but I believe keeping the joy in painting and not being afraid of failure creates the greatest opportunity for growth and success. With this mindset, you can paint



Northport Public School senior Haylie Spears is seen painting just along the Platte River during the district's first plein air painting and poetic retreat. Enterprise photo by Meakalia Previch-Liu

from your heart. And painting from your heart creates artwork that speaks to the viewer."

Also at the gathering was John Evans, Jen Evans father who was an art teacher to elementary and middle school students for 30-plus years. He said plein air gives students another tie to the environment and ultimately

helps them to become good stewards of the land.

"It's all encompassing," John said. "It's a challenge, plein air is very hard because the light source changes every few minutes, but it's worth it... I had a lot of kids where art is what kept them in school, and so however we can reach kids is important."

S-B grad returns to perform in T-C

By Amy Hubbell
amy@leelanaunews.com

Music education improves academic performance, enhances cognitive skills, and positive impacts on social-emotional development.

But for 2008 Suttons Bay graduate Andy Wheelock, it formed the basis of an exciting career in the field of music.

"My teacher, Annie Bentley, supported and encouraged me," said Wheelock, who was in the area this week performing with his group WHEE3TRIO at the Alluvian in Traverse City. "She's the reason I went to music school."

Bentley arranged an audition for the young drummer at Central Michigan University (CMU).

"Music education and performance is the heaviest in terms of course/credit load," he said. "I carried 19, 20, 21 credits per semester ... I was a shocked as far as how much you have to do."

This coursework was in addition to time spent in the Chippewa Marching Band and small ensembles.

After graduating from CMU, Wheelock went on to earn both a master's and Ph.D in music education from the University of Illinois, Urbana-Champaign.

As a composer and arranger, Wheelock writes regularly for his own recording projects as well as big bands, percussion ensembles, Samba Bateria's, and Pan-Afro-Latin Ensembles. His second record as a leader with the WHEE3TRIO received outstanding reviews including "a joyfully hypnotic listening experience" by Dan McClenaghan at All About Jazz.

WHEE3TRIO, the Live Edge Trio, KEWO, and can be heard playing regularly with the



Suttons Bay graduate Andy Wheelock credits much of his musical success to his instrumental band teacher at his school. Courtesy photo

Gonzalo Teppa Quintet, Ben Markley, New Stream Brass Ensemble, the University of Wyoming Jazz Faculty, and the Cheyenne Symphony. Wheelock has had the honor of sharing the stage with Bill O'Connell, Steve Nelson, Adam Birnbaum, Henry Linarez, Terrel Stafford, Ernie Watts, Craig Handy, Jorge Alabe, SK Kakraba, Jorge Glem, Bobby Shew, Chuchito Valdés, Joel Frahm, Bob Bowman, Ivan Trevino, and William Moersch.

As a clinician and adjudicator, Wheelock has been a guest artist at Boise State, Ohio State University, Central Michigan

University, Friends University, Colorado Mesa University, Columbus State University, Interlochen School for the Arts, Washburn, Hope College, University of Wisconsin-Madison, Wichita State, Casper College, and the University of Illinois.

He currently serves as the director of Jazz Studies and Percussion area coordinator at the University of Wyoming where he directs the Wyoming Jazz Ensemble, Jazz Combos, Samba Bateria, Pan-Afro-Latin Drumming group, and the UWYO Percussion Ensemble.

S-B band earns top marks

By Amy Hubbell
amy@leelanaunews.com

The Suttons Bay Public Schools High School Band has achieved a significant milestone, qualifying for the State Band and Orchestra Festival and earning a Division II rating — an "Excellent" distinction — under Michigan's rigorous adjudication standards.

This marks the first time in 10 years that Suttons Bay students have performed at the state level, a proud and meaningful accomplishment that reflects the hard work, dedication, and musical growth of the entire ensemble.

"We should be very proud of our students," said Dante Billeci, Suttons Bay Public Schools band director. "This achievement is a direct result of their focus, passion, and willingness to push themselves musically. They represented our school and community with excellence."

The Division II rating is the second-highest possible honor at the State Festival, underscoring the band's outstanding performance and musical excellence.

The 7th and 8th grade band earned a Division II ("Excellent") rating at District Band and Orchestra Festival — the first in six years.

And the high school band earned a Division I ("Superior") rating at District Festival — the first time in a decade — and went on to earn a Division II rating at State Festival, also a first in 10 years.

Currently there are 54 students in grades 5-12 participating in band at Suttons Bay Schools. Each band class includes roughly 10-20 students, depending on the grade level.

"While our numbers may seem modest, I want to empha-

size that the strength of our program lies not just in enrollment, but in the dedication, musical growth, and sense of community our students demonstrate," Billeci said. "These students have achieved remarkable things — through hard work, a deepening love of music, and meaningful collaborations within and beyond our school."

Among there more than 30 students have received scholarships to attend music camps and enrichment programs; eight students participated in the Michigan School Band and Orchestra Association

(MSBOA) Middle School Honor Band; two high school students earned Division II ratings at Solo and Ensemble Festival; and five middle schoolers earned Division I ratings.

Suttons Bay Bands Mentorship Program, supported by Suttons Bay Friends of the Fine Arts, pair professional musicians from throughout northern Michigan who regularly work one-on-one and in small groups with students.

Several students now perform with the Northport Community Band, which is also directed by Billeci. This intergenerational group includes musicians from across the region.

Other program highlights: • In March 2024, the MSU Jazz Orchestras and GRAMMY-nominated pianist Bobby Floyd performed at the Suttons Bay HS auditorium as part of a fundraiser for our program.

• In November 2024, our high school band students performed alongside GRAMMY-nominated guitarist Dan Wilson and the MSU Jazz Nonets in another successful fundraising concert.

• In spring 2024, the school launched a high school pep band to energize and support Suttons Bay basketball players.