

Dear Karin:

Thank you for speaking with me last week about my concerns over one of the photographs in the "On the Borderline" photography exhibition on display in the Madison Municipal Building. As we discussed, I was disturbed by the photograph of the young child pretending to be a "gangsta," and appreciate your taking the time to share with me some of the background of how the exhibit came to be. I can also understand your reluctance to pull the photograph from the exhibit, especially in light of the fact that it's been up for several weeks now. The time to have made that decision would have been before the exhibition went up. Since these photos were taken by participants in the "Girls, Inc." program, I am surprised the program's director allowed the photograph to be included. She must know how important it is to take every opportunity to point kids away from elements of our society that endorse destructive behaviors.

I am really more disturbed by the cultural mindset, so prevalent in segments of our society, which glorifies the "gang" lifestyle than I am by the photograph itself. However I do think including this photograph in the exhibition in some way condones this violent and dangerous behavior, especially since all of the other photographs in the exhibition are nice photos of kids being kids; this photo is presented as just another example of a kid being a kid. But it's not - it's an example of a child who sees this extremely dangerous element of our society as cool and desirable. I'm sure the child posing in the photograph does not truly understand why being in a gang is such a bad thing, and the young photographer also probably does not understand all of the dangerous ramifications of involvement in the "gang" culture - this is just what they know about from the world around them, but by including the photograph in this otherwise well-done display the art teacher is legitimizing something that is like a cancer in our society. I'm guessing that if the child in the photograph had been pretending to smoke a cigarette the teacher would have immediately excluded it from the exhibition and possibly taken the opportunity to speak about why kids should not smoke cigarettes. This photograph presented a similar teachable moment -- instead of including the photograph in the exhibition, the teacher should have taken the opportunity to help the young photographer understand what being a "gangsta" really means and why the photograph could not be included, rather than just going ahead and including it in the exhibit (probably because she didn't want to hurt the feelings of the young photographer).

I think many people Madison are still in denial about the magnitude of the gang problem in Madison. I know the gun violence on the southwest side of Madison has been in the news recently but the problem continues to grow in many areas of town (I think you said the kids in these photographs live on the north side of town). Seeing this photograph on display has reminded me, and probably you as well, that there are children in Madison who live intimately with the reality of gang violence every day. We have to take every opportunity to teach our children that the violence represented by gangs (such as pulling out a gun and shooting somebody) is not acceptable behavior, no matter what culture you come from.

Thanks again allowing me to express my thoughts. I enjoy the ArtSpace exhibits on display in the Madison Municipal building and look forward to the next one.

Sincerely,
Roslyn Wise
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