

## Lee Middle students spending June blue, in color, in focus

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Roughly 20 students at Lee Middle School spend their June mornings in class, learning to play and sing the blues, paint in watercolor, produce videos and sharpen their academic, personal and teamwork skills.



Larry Roland, 15, watercolors a dragon's head. Behind him is Ebbonie Joiner, 13. They are being instructed by Crossroads volunteer instructor Gail Boland of Columbus. (Photo: Tippet) [Photo Gallery](#)

"Three, two, one," Ashley Kelly counted down as she pointed the camera at her classmate, Pershunda Buchanan.

"Good morning, Pershunda, I'm Raven and I'm going to be interviewing you about the summer program, Crossroads," explained the director/producer, Raven Border.

In addition to the camera focused on her, two lights shined on Buchanan, who is seated on a stool in front of an expansive green screen. The professional equipment matched the serious attitudes donned by the students. No one dared to speak as Border began her interview.

On Mondays, students divide into three classes: watercolor, video production or the blues group.

Antonio Gordon chose the video production class.

"I picked this class because it seemed more interesting than the others," Gordon admitted, adding with a smile, "I'm the anchorman. I like it because I'm in front of the camera."

Gordon described the magic behind the green screen.

"For instance, you can have different backgrounds," Gordon said. "Maybe flowers, a highway."

Downstairs, the blues group practiced.

"The blues group is going to perform two songs they've written," said Ivey Ivy, Crossroads project coordinator.

She is referring to the students' showcase, which will be Tuesday, June 26 at 6 p.m. at the Columbus Arts Council.

"The video class will show their short documentary," Ivy continued, and the watercolor class will "have an exhibit of their pieces."

For now though, the students are hard at work, learning chords and brush strokes.

"The beauty of the blues scale is that you can't play or sing a wrong note," Dawn Barham quickly noted as she resumed practice. The students sit in front of her in a semi-circle, each holding a shiny, electric blue acoustic guitar. Barham positions her guitar awkwardly so the students on her left can see her fingers on the strings, while she looks right to the singers.

"I looked in the refrigerator, ain't nothing to be found," sang Antwanna Perry.

"That's what I call the hungry blues," laughed Barham. "You cannot sing the blues with correct grammar."

The class stopped and started frequently, the vibe that of an educational jam session rather than a stuffy lecture.

Down the hall, in another relaxed atmosphere, sat a handful of watercolor students, each in front of their own large, wooden drawing boards, tilted at the appropriate angle.

Alexis Kidd described the process of shading, holding her example, which is painted in varying hues of blue.

"It went from darker to lighter," Kidd said, noting the technique she used. "It's because less water be on it."

Students' work lies scattered throughout the room, a testament to the many lessons learned, projects completed and techniques mastered.

Crossroads is about more than music, art and video though.

"Tuesday through Thursday, teachers work (with students) on their leadership skills, personal development, team-building, language arts and math," Ivy said. "Fridays we go on a field trip. This week we're going to Plymouth Bluff."

There, Dr. Marty Harvill from Mississippi University for Women will take the students on the Explorer pontoon boat and show them how to seine for fish. In a surprise twist, Ryan Beatty will also be there with his collection of snakes to

engage the students in what Ivy called "safe risk-taking."

Last Friday, the students toured the Columbus Arts Council, The Commercial Dispatch's production area, the mayor's office, and the studio at WCBI, where they got to do the news send-off.

"It was a big deal for them to speak to the mayor, very important," said Ivy. "He's an educator, so they listened and responded well to him."

Next Friday, the program will end with a fun field trip to Geysers Falls.

The Mississippi Department of Education issued the grant that funds Crossroads to MUW's Roger Wicker Center for Creative Learning. There are five community partners: Center for Creative Learning, Columbus Arts Council, Columbus Municipal School District, Community Counseling Center and the Lowndes County Juvenile Detention Center.

"The grant wants us to provide a safe and enriching environment outside normal school hours," Ivy explained.

The smiling, productive students at Lee Middle are proof of the positive benefits the grant provided.