

A DIFFERENT VISION

In the photo above, Tony Totten shares his story with UNCG student Emily Jay, with assistance from an interpreter.

WHAT IT MEANS TO BE SEEN

The Industries of the Blind's massive building takes up an entire city block on Gate City Boulevard but, with its nondescript brick exterior, few people noticed it there. That all changed, however, with last year's installation of six larger-than-life paintings scrolled out across the building's façade. The 8x10-foot banners represent a three-year collaboration between the company's employees and UNCG students.

These paintings by students in the College of Visual and Performing Arts give insights into the triumphs and struggles of the Industries of the Blind's employees – over half of whom are blind. "It would be easy to have a mural showing the things we manufacture here, or of somebody wearing dark sunglasses walking a path with a cane in their hand," says Richard Oliver, the company's director of community outreach and government relations. "But that doesn't tell the whole story of who we are – or of the people who work here."

The banners tell the stories of employees like Afiya Jackson, who had to fight to keep her children when authorities tried to take them away, believing blindness would prevent her from caring for them. And Tony Totten, who was born with the ability to see and hear but lost both senses over time.

"The visibility of these banners shows employees that their stories are worth being heard – and are just as valid as anyone else's," says Mariam Stephan, associate professor of art and painting.

"The paintings are an embodiment of their successes."



(from top to bottom) Studio art student Jordan Harp works on "The Sun All Around Me," a collaboration with Industries of the Blind employee Danielle Woods. Student Cristal Zeballos sculpts a tactile ceramics piece based on "Riding Blind," a painting by student William Suits and employee Thomas Martin. Art history student Julia Alexander interviews Afiya Jackson about the painting she created with studio art student Mary Martinez.

ALL HANDS ON DECK

At first, the goal was for six visual arts students to partner, one-on-one, with six employees to learn more about the employees' life experiences and to brainstorm ways to communicate them via art – both through a painting and an accompanying audio narrative to describe the painting.

"But like any exciting project, it began to snowball," says Adam Carlin, the college's director of community engagement, who partnered with Oliver to bring the project to life. As the project grew, the art became a more interactive experience, and more inclusive for the people it was representing.

Soon, music students created original scores to support the paintings and the audio narratives collected by art history students. Interior architecture students designed audio boxes with two buttons so that blind or low-vision passersby can easily walk up and listen to the narratives and music. And fellow School of Arts students created touch-friendly bronze relief sculptures to accompany each painting. Eventually, the project involved more than 100 students – a number that continued to grow this year, as creative writing students joined in to interpret a second round of 10 paintings through fiction.

"These students are learning a lot about the importance of making art not just for a community, but in collaboration with a community," says Carlin. "That's an important part of community engagement, which is vital to our college's identity."

Stephan adds that the project raised the bar for how her students approach painting. "They had to think differently about the visual language in general," she says. "You can't make a literal picture of what it means to feel a cool breeze on your face. You have to learn how to incorporate non-visual experiences."

When she began to partner with Mary Martinez, a third-year art student, Afiya Jackson didn't know what to expect. She couldn't have imagined the final painting – an image of Jackson walking down a New Orleans street with her son and daughter.

"We discussed colors, different shapes, and how I see things in a different way – not being able to visually see objects," says Jackson. "We had conversations about my life and how I live independently, as well as how I can travel alone and with my small kids. I'm able to live my life as independently as anyone else in the community."

WHEN TRAUMA GOES TO SCHOOL

A fifth-grade teacher leads a lesson with a mostly engaged class. One student, however, seems disconnected, or “zoned out,” you might say. It’s not the first time this semester, or even this week.

Mental health issues are on the rise among all ages. One study in the *Journal of Children and Adolescent Counseling*, by UNCG’s Dr. Carrie Wachter Morris and Dr. Kelly Wester, found 13% of high school students were at serious risk for suicide.

Professor Wachter Morris and Burlington Industries Excellence Professor L. DiAnne Borders are two of the researchers heading up the School of Education’s new NC Academy for Stress, Trauma, and Resilience, which offers trauma-informed training and services to K-12 schools and the wider community.

Traumatic life events and circumstances – such as poverty, abuse, or loss – can leave survivors struggling. “Your brain shifts to cope,” says Dr. Borders. “You experience ‘fight, flight, or freeze’ because your brain has been retrained to view certain things as threats.”

Young people may hide harmful life experiences and counter them with detrimental behaviors. Disciplinary actions can further isolate them. They are negatively labeled by peers and teachers. They fall behind in – or are even expelled from – school.

One academy focus is breaking this cycle.

“We want to evaluate how students are behaving and how teachers are responding, to make the school environment more trauma-sensitive,” says Wachter Morris.

The academy began its work last year with Rockingham County Schools, or RCS, one of just three districts in North Carolina to secure a U.S. Department of Education grant for nearly \$2.6 million to expand mental health services. The funds, secured in collaboration with the UNCG researchers, will put more mental health providers inside schools and pay for teacher and staff training.

“The funds come at a critical time,” says Dr. Stephanie Ellis, RCS executive director of behavioral health, crisis intervention, and student safety and a project partner.

“Thirty-seven percent of students at the county’s four traditional high schools report depression symptoms,” she notes. “North Carolina ranks suicide as the second leading cause of death among young people, ages 14-24.”

With funding from the grant, UNCG counseling master’s students are serving as interns in RCS and offering trauma-informed training to school counselors and educators.

“As more teachers build trauma-informed classrooms, teachers will be able to recognize when a child’s response is less about a discipline issue, and more about a survival issue,” says Borders. “We want to give them ways to cope and manage.”

The researchers are also assessing wellness among RCS teachers and staff, particularly in the context of the pandemic. As Wachter Morris explains, “It’s not just students who need support.”

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STORIES BEHIND THE PAINTINGS

On his desk, Oliver maintains a growing list of employees eager to be represented in future rounds of paintings. For these employees, the opportunity to feel seen and heard is irresistible. “I’m sure this happens to people with many disabilities, but it’s tough being out in public,” says Oliver, who is legally blind and has worked with the Industries of the Blind for 25 years. “You’re at a restaurant with someone who isn’t blind, and the waitstaff speaks to the person you’re with rather than you to see what you want.”

That perception of helplessness is amplified by popular media. “A lot of times in TV and movies, blind guys are helpless. But that’s not who we are. People here are truly independent and self-sustaining,” he says. “They are building careers to provide for their families and send their kids to college. That is the journey that UNCG is helping us to share.”

UNCG’s Green Fund, a student-led and student-funded campus-based program that offers opportunities to students and employees to forward UNCG’s sustainability mission, partially funded the project. The fund’s committee said it was drawn to its “synergistic connections to the environment, economics, aesthetics, and social equity.” Support also came from a UNCG community-engaged scholarship grant.

Oliver hopes people driving by will be struck by the banners. He wants them to park in the Industries of the Blind’s parking lot, get out of their cars, and go press every button so they can really get to know the stories behind the paintings.

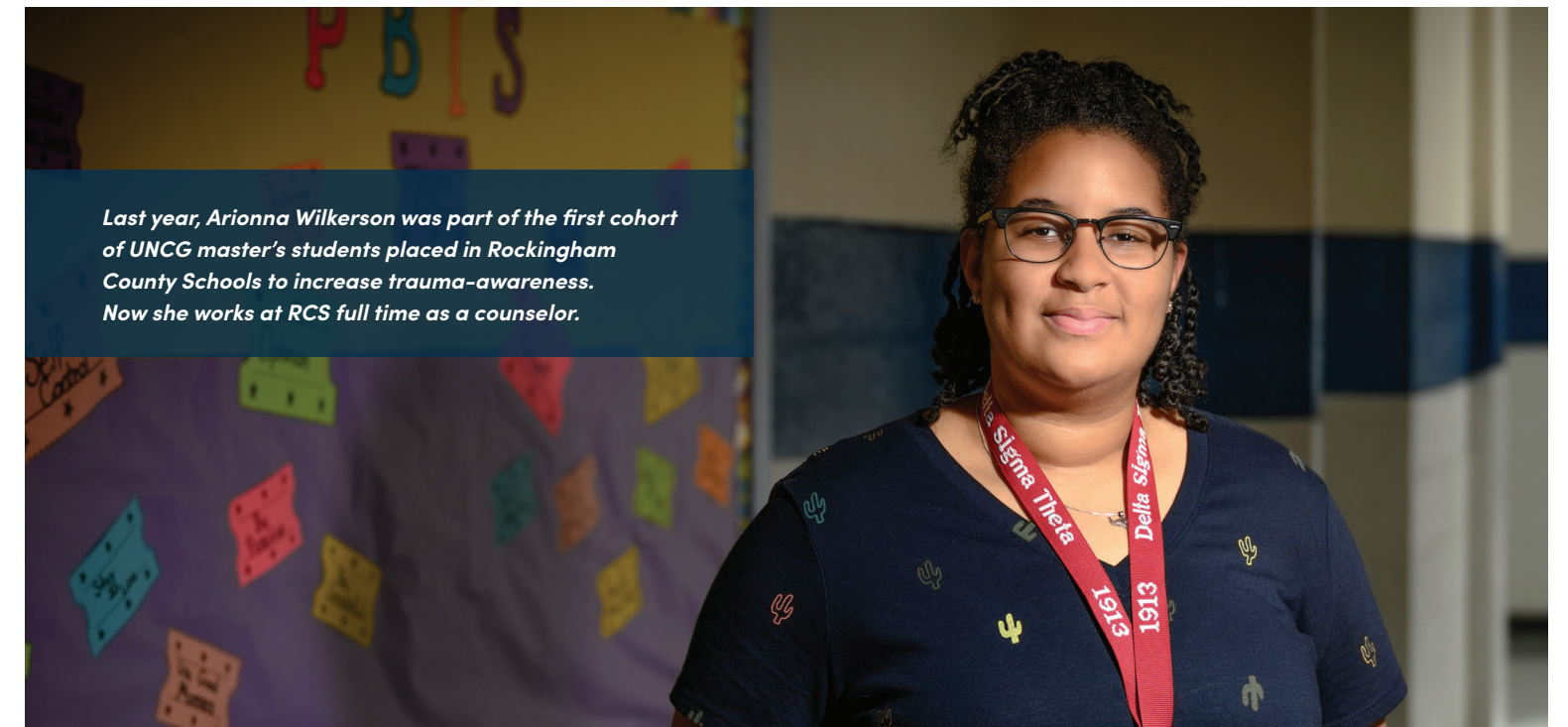
“We are all in the world together striving to make it a better place for each other,” Jackson says. “My goal is to educate as many people as possible about blindness and to let them know that we live the same way they live – just a little bit differently.”

by Robin Sutton Anders • learn more at go.uncg.edu/vpa-iob



SIGHT. SOUND. TOUCH.

Anthony Johnson, Tanessa Brown, and AJ Inglesby (top to bottom) explore the ceramic pieces developed based on their stories. Above, the team installs pieces developed in the second year of the project.



Last year, Arionna Wilkerson was part of the first cohort of UNCG master’s students placed in Rockingham County Schools to increase trauma-awareness. Now she works at RCS full time as a counselor.

An earlier version of this story, written by Andrea Spencer, appeared in UNCG’s “Transform” Magazine. If you or someone you know is in crisis, call the National Suicide Prevention Lifeline at 800.273.8255 or text 741741 to reach a Crisis Text Line to reach a counselor.