Art provides hope at courthouse

BY REBECCA LAKE
LOTTERY
WILLIMANTIC — When Judge Francis J. Foley III decided to seek help sprucing up the walls of the Superior Court for Juvenile Matters on Columbus Avenue in Willimantic, he expected to be the recipient of some "dusky old photos," just taking up closet space.

What he got instead was something to behold.

"I got a wonderful, wonderful gift for our courthouse and our building," Foley said, following an exhibition at the courthouse dubbed "Vision of Optimism" by the Eastern Connecticut State University Design Group, which contributed to the exhibition.

On the once pale and dray walls of the courthouse now hang multiple pieces of artwork that bystanders agreed Friday transformed the courtroom and the corridor.

Foley said his intention was to brighten the atmosphere for the countless children who frequent the courthouse and specifically, his courtroom, where many of them are freed for legal adoption.

After five years in child protection, Foley will retire in June.

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(Above) Windham Center School second-grader Holly Weldon, left, is commended for her artwork by Eastern Connecticut State University President Elisa Nunez, center, and Calhoun School Principal John O'Shea, right, dean of ECSU arts and sciences department. They were attending a reception dedicated to several pieces of student art that will be on display at Superior Court for Juvenile Matters in Willimantic, LEFT: People listen to speakers during Friday's reception.

WILLIMANTIC resident Mark Malmodano, 12, expressed his gratitude for his portrait artist Vincent Van Gogh Friday at the juvenile courthouse Willimantic. The court dedicated several pieces of artwork done by local students that will decorate the facility. Court officials hope the art will soothe the experience of children having to deal with juvenile court.

Mark said he chose the photo from a pile of pictures of famous artists because it looked easy. He found out, in fact, that it took him two or three tries to get it just the way he wanted it.

"The face was the most difficult," Mark said, saying he had a little help with the eyes. "I like the way I made the shadowing in his face."

Mark said he's always enjoyed artwork and sometimes gets in trouble for drawing in class.

But there was nothing but pride surrounding him Friday as the parents looked on while he talked about his work and what he understood about the project to which he contributed.

"It's to help encourage people when they come here not to be judged," Mark said. "It's not to see someone for what they are but to see what they can do in the art and to make other people feel good."

Mark admitted the he felt pretty excited to have his artwork hanging in the courtroom.

Anne Dawson, professor of art at ECSU, said the exhibition, which is now a permanent fixture in the courthouse, is a tribute to the importance of the Arts.

"Art really can transform lives," Dawson said.

As far as Foley is concerned, if the brilliantly displayed artwork ever brings a smile to a child's face, it's served its purpose.

"At juvenile court, we have kids who are scared, perhaps neglected and abused, and who are desperately in need of encouragement and a belief in a better future," Foley said. "The artwork is intended to send a message of hope, strength and courage."