

Southern High's AP art classes foster students' abilities

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Home is where the art is, at least when it comes to Michael Bell's classroom at Southern High School and his Advanced Placement students.



Benches, easels and even books in the room are covered with skillful paintings and drawings, and the overall impression is much more like a working artist's studio.

But in a sense, that's the whole point: to create a space that fosters creativity, is comfortable to work in, and readies some students for college art and beyond.

"It feels like home," said senior Seth Millman, 18. "It's kind of cozy."

Even students who don't plan on a career in the field said they relish the chance to

take the school's AP art classes. "It's almost like a family. We (make) art and get our thoughts out," said Tye Ellis, a 17-year-old senior who plans to study engineering and science in college. "I've been able to look at things in a different light."

Last Friday, he and several students had their eyes trained on dancers who served as models. AP photography students like Tye snapped pictures of the girls in various poses, while AP drawing students worked on sketches emphasizing things like shape or line.

Soft rock music played in the background as the students worked and Bell walked around to answer questions or give directions for the next assignment. The casual atmosphere belies a lot of hard work on the part of both Bell and his students. Bell's classroom isn't a place to sit back and slack off. Many students wear black wristbands with the words "imagination," "dedication" and "hard work" printed on them in white capital letters.

And the commitment is paying off. For example, all the students who submitted AP portfolios in drawing, photography and 3-D design last year passed, and students received more than \$330,000 in scholarships.

"It's hard, but it really gets you prepared," said senior Sara King, 17. "It tests you. It tests your (skill). It tests your work ethic and it tests your time management skills."

In addition to drawing and photography, Southern also offers AP art history and AP 3-D design. In all, about 40 students, mainly juniors and seniors, are enrolled in the classes.

Katie Emmitt, who graduated last year and earned \$215,000 in scholarships, said the classes prepared her well for art school. The 18-year-old Shady Side resident is a freshman at the Maryland Institute College of Art in Baltimore.

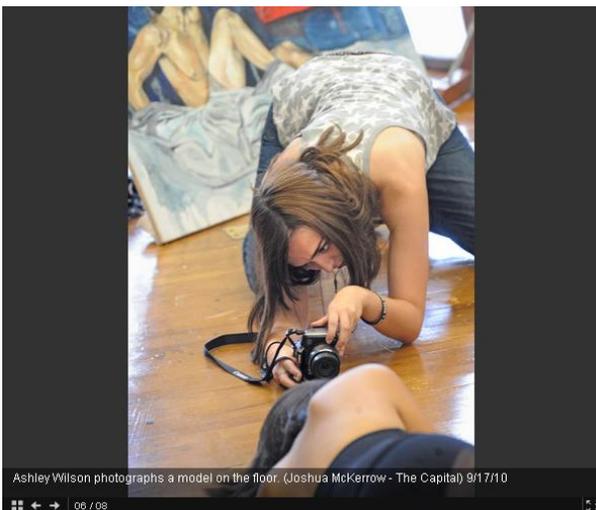
"I know that just with the things I've experienced in the past three weeks, I've (applied a lot of what I've learned)," Katie said.

Broad brush



Teacher Michale Bell, right, talks with students, from left Kelsey Herndon, Katrina Moore, and Courtney Schallhorn in the Southern High School AP art program. (Joshua McKerrow - The Capital) 9/17/10

08 / 08



Ashley Wilson photographs a model on the floor. (Joshua McKerrow - The Capital) 9/17/10

06 / 08

One of the current projects Bell's drawing and photography students are tackling is called "31 Nights."

Simply put, students are required to produce a new painting or drawing or photograph based on themes Bell provides as homework for 31 straight days. One of the purposes of the project is to get students to think on their feet, something Bell emphasizes in class as well.

"What they're doing in here is becoming creative problem-solvers," explained Bell, 39.

He'll spend the next month undertaking the challenge himself. "I don't like to throw anything at them that I myself haven't done," he said. "I just wanted to do it with them to show them that I'm taking their journey with them."

Bell also mentioned that as the level of his students' work rises, he has to stay on top of his game. "They get so good I need to stay good, too," he said. "I need to keep my bar above theirs."

Bell has been teaching at Southern for 16 years, well before there were any AP art classes. He became department chairman in 2008. Four years earlier, a couple years after the AP classes kicked off, he was named the county's teacher of the year. He's up for a national teaching award this academic year.

"Michael does a fantastic job," said Southern Principal Patricia Plitt.

Since Bell is a successful artist in his own right, with work hanging in galleries across the country, he also can impart practical experience about the art world to his students. He currently is working on a screenplay based on a series of paintings called "Ticket to Ride," which chronicles a day in the life of a woman on the subway.



"He doesn't look at us as amateur artists," said senior Louis Fratino, 16. "We're all just artists."

Bell tells students how hard it is to make a living as an artist, but doesn't dissuade them from pursuing a career in the field. He added that the mix of teaching and solo work suits him well.

"My professional career, it's doing good. But this is this where kids' hopes and dreams come true," he said, glancing around his classroom.

Historic undertaking

After Bell's class ended on Friday, some of the drawing and photography students headed upstairs to Marlene Kramer's classroom for AP art history. Her space also has an artsy feel, with almost all of the walls covered with colorful work.

The assignment for the day was to describe and analyze ancient Aegean art. At the end of the session, students had the chance to work with Egyptian paste as a small, fun project.

In Kramer's class they'll study everything from prehistoric art to modern art, with plenty of stops in between.

"She makes everything fun," junior Jessica Ford, 16, said of Kramer. "She doesn't, like, just stand there (and lecture)."

Ford said studying art history gives her greater perspective for her own work and helps her appreciate a wide range of art.

As she and other students delved into the Minoan and Mycenaean culture, two AP 3-D students worked on their own projects, which included pottery and construction of a cardboard guitar.

"You just let all your ideas out," senior Maxi Garte, 17, said of the AP art classes. "There's a lot of creativity; different ways to think about things. Plus, it's just really fun."

