"The Rainbow is a Circle" Summer Art Camp Provides Safe Space for Creativity

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Students were free to create their own projects during the CLL's LGBTQIA+ art camp.

Colorful mobiles, tactile sculptures, and narrative comic panels are just a few of the unique pieces that are currently found in the Lyndsley Wilkerson Gallery on the first floor of the Sorenson Center for Clinic Excellence. The gallery is hosting “The Rainbow is a Circle,” an exhibit created by participants of this summer’s LGBTQIA+ art camp held in collaboration with the CHAOS Learning Lab (CLL) in the Emma Eccles Jones College of Education and Human Services and the Arts Access program in the Caine College of the Arts.

Taryn Sommers, director of summer and after school art camps for the CLL for the past two years, began working in the lab as an undergraduate research assistant to lab co-director Colby Tofel-Grehl, associate professor in the School of Teacher Education and Leadership. Around the same time, she started a position with Arts Access, a program directed by Raymond Veon, assistant dean for arts education in the Caine College of the Arts.

It didn’t take long for Sommers to recognize the common goals and values between the CLL and Arts Access: both programs strive to incorporate arts experiences into education in meaningful ways and expand access to the arts to underserved groups, such as racial minorities and individuals with disabilities. The CLL has an additional focus on integrating art with science, technology, engineering, and math (STEM) learning modules to expand early STEM education opportunities.

A common goal between both programs is creating spaces for the queer community in the area, especially youth. As Sommers became an assistant manager in the CLL and started organizing and leading art camps herself, the two programs began to collaborate on projects such as art camps aimed specifically at the LGBTQIA+ youth ages 10-17.

A student project made with felt, buttons, and small lights.

“The youth need a lot more help and safe spaces,” said Sommers. “I wanted to bring in more opportunities for the kids so they could use supplies they wouldn’t normally get to use and do things like the gallery exhibit.” Sommers added that this summer’s art camp is the first to create an exhibit for the Wilkerson Gallery.

Throughout the school year and over the summer, the CLL hosts a variety of art camps for youth and other age groups in its space on the second floor of the Education building, aiming to reach general community participants as well as the queer community specifically. Queer camps are always advertised as being for LGBTQIA+ individuals and allies so that individuals who aren’t part of the queer community or who haven’t come out as queer still feel welcome to participate however is most comfortable for them.

“They get to have a place where they can be themselves, and they can either make art with their identity or just make art in general,” said Sommers. “Their identity isn’t the only thing that ties them together with the rest of the group. It’s really cool to see them make friends and hear them talk about life and how much these camps mean to them.”

The CHAOS Learning Lab is located on the second floor of the Education building.

This summer's queer youth art camp took place for a few hours a day over the course of three weeks. For the first few sessions, participants were guided through specific projects that integrated science and technology concepts, such as making paper and fabric circuits with copper tape, conductive thread, and lights. From there, students were free to expand on the provided projects or use the variety of paints, canvases, and other crafting supplies to come up with their own project ideas.

"Some of the kids will challenge themselves a lot, and I always love to see that they will do things that are a little bit harder," said Sommers. "We always have assistants to help them make whatever vision they have come to life, but I love to see their ideas and see them wanting to do something that's difficult. Seeing their creativity explode just from a few projects and the supplies to make anything is always so cool."

In addition to these freeform opportunities to create, the camp also hosted professional teaching artists who showed the participants their own art methods, such as storytelling and video production. These artists worked with the students individually and as a group to help them find the stories that they wanted to tell and learn how to incorporate those messages into their artwork.

The title of the gallery is a poignant example of how the students themselves led the direction and vision of the overall camp and the culminating exhibit. After brainstorming in the first couple of days, one participant brought up the fact that rainbows, a longstanding symbol of pride and celebration of identity, actually form in complete circles rather than just the arc that we can typically see, and the students opted to name the exhibit after this idea.

New this year, the summer art camp also held an adult session for individuals 18 and older in the evenings, providing adults who work during the day the same opportunities to work on their own creative projects, learn from the visiting artists, and explore STEM concepts through paper circuits and battery-powered sewing pieces. Sommers hopes to continue broadening the audiences that participate in the art camps, further fulfilling the mission of the CHAOS Lab as a whole.

"A huge part of the CHAOS lab is helping people bring STEM into classrooms and into their identity," said Sommers. "A lot of times people don't think of themselves as an engineer or a tinkerer. But when we give them opportunities to make these fun projects, then they maybe think of themselves a little bit differently, more able to do things that they might not have thought they could do before."

Featuring pieces created by both student and adult artists, "The Rainbow is a Circle" is open for viewing during the Lyndsley Wilkerson Gallery's regular hours until August 18.