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- About Us
- Advertise
- Archives
- Forum
- Classifieds
- ePaper
- Live TV
- Contact us

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- Lebanon
- Middle East
- Lebanon News
- Politics
- Business
- Local News
- Lebanon
- Examiner
- Editorial
- Opinion
- Snapshots
- Arts & Culture
- Forbes Features
- SCI & TECH **NEW**
- Health **NEW**
- Odd News **NEW**
- News Briefs
- Readers' Letters
- Star Scene
- Photo Essay
- Today in Brief
- NEW**
- Site Services
- Registration
- PDF version
- ePaper
- Archives
- Research Tool
- News in Video
- Live TV
- Movie Guide **NEW**
- Job Finder
- Fun & Games
- Sudoku online
- Horoscope **NEW**
- Weather **NEW**
- Food Recipes
- NEW**
- Fitness Videos
- NEW**
- Soccer Stats **NEW**
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- Travel Guide
- SMS Alerts
- DS Toolbar
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LOCAL NEWS

Artists reclaim Saint Nicholas Steps for day of painting - and tolerance

By Matthew Mosley
Daily Star staff

Tuesday, December 02, 2008

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BEIRUT: The picturesque Saint Nicholas Steps in Gemmayzeh were even more colorful than usual on Sunday. Flowering shrubs were augmented by a host of vibrant chalk pictures as the NGO A Step Away took over with a street painting contest.

The event was organized under the auspices of the program The Other, under which A Step Away hopes to promote values such as diversity, non-discrimination and tolerance through participatory art events.

At the street painting competition, more than 100 young people competed in 35 different teams to win the prize for best anti-discrimination image.

Organizers advertised the contest at many schools and universities in an effort to attract the widest range of people. Street painting contests will also take place in Jbeil on December 7 and in Sidon on December 14.

This is not the first event produced by The Other. In 2005, organizers gathered 45 students from all six governorates of Lebanon to participate in an anti-discrimination workshop. Participants worked with professionals to produce short animated films on this theme.

In 2007 a similar workshop took place, only this time the students produced pieces of video reportage. Participants from these events have gone on to become members of the organizing committee.

Farah Baalbaki, 20, studies journalism at the Lebanese University. She took part in the original 2005 event, and went on to help organize Sunday's street painting contest.

issue of discrimination," she said.

"It's important to expose this hidden

Raafat Darazi, 17, also helped organize the contest. He attends the Makassad High School in Sidon and became aware of The Other after participating in the 2007 workshop. "This is only the beginning of our work to promote tolerance," he told

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Participants had an early start. Hamza, Hayat and Mounir, students at the Lebanese American University, said they started work on their painting at 8.30 a.m.

Maher and Mazen, who both study architecture at the Lebanese University, explained the significance of their image of a mirror to The Daily Star.

"Looking in the mirror, you see yourself with all your flaws. It is necessary to look critically at yourself before you begin to judge other people," said Maher.

Other groups had drawn composite faces representing different races, emphasizing our common humanity.

"We're really pleased with the event," said Farah. "There images are amazing and there's been some great debate about tolerance and discrimination."

The organizers had gathered together a panel of artists, reporters and activists to award the prizes. True to the tolerant and accepting ethic of the event, participants did not seem competitive. "It's been a great day, we've had fun," said Hayat. "That's all that matters."

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