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# International artist paints 'Just a Piece of Freedom' mural in Old Saybrook with local helpers

Sarah Page Kyrzcz

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Mural artist Rafael Blanco next to a mural, Just a Piece of Freedom, nearing completion incorporating six Old Saybrook Public School students on the side of River Mart on Main Street in Old Saybrook on June 21, 2022.

Arnold Gold / Hearst Connecticut Media

applied to the “Just a Piece of Freedom” mural on the south wall of River Mart.



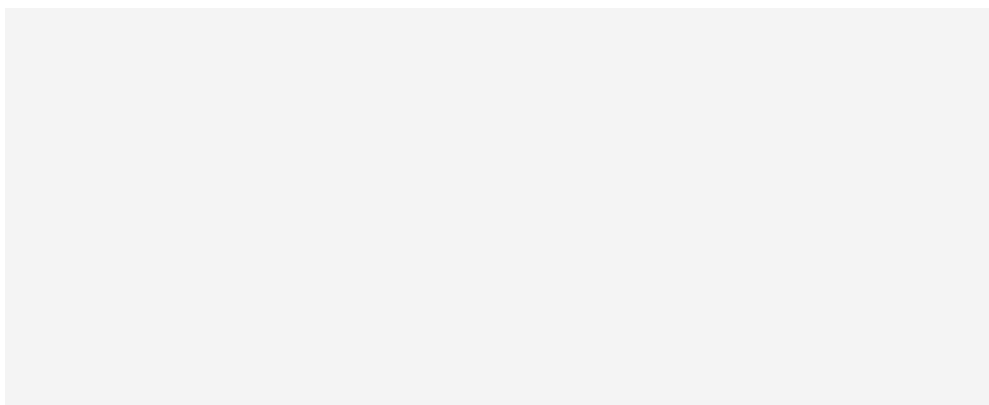
With a playlist from different countries, including French-Spanish singer Manu Chao, Bruce Springsteen and U2, music filled the air as a steady stream of onlookers flocked to the 17- by 74- foot mural, created by international muralist Rafael Blanco.

“I saw how people were really liking that vibe,” the artist said, taking a quick break from his 12- to 14-hour day.

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The artwork features the portraits of six local students, three females and three males, chosen from a pool of 18 essays.

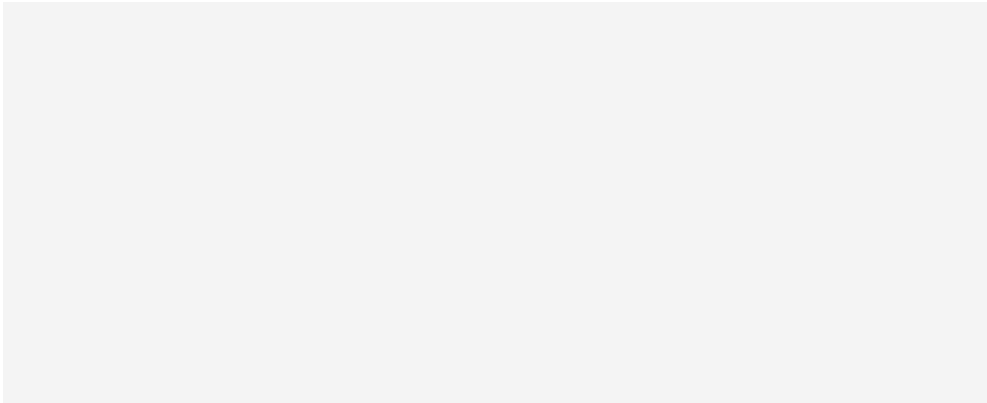


Teddy Chacha; Old Saybrook High School's Camilo Bracho and Avery Rueckert and alumnus Davonte Mitchell.

These students were chosen for their diversity.

"They told us a little bit about their background and heritage, as well as their talents and accolades," said Hannah Newton, an art teacher at Old Saybrook High School and Old Saybrook Middle School.

The mural is the culmination of high school student Nick Chacha's yearlong school project, combined with his interest in art.



"The message is that if you take a little second to recognize each other's different heritage and where we come from, we can all feel more connected," the incoming senior said.

"We can find those different connections and we can start talking more and feel more accepted," he said. "It can bring our community together."

Essayist Bracho is Latino and is shown in the mural with a butterfly on his left shoulder.

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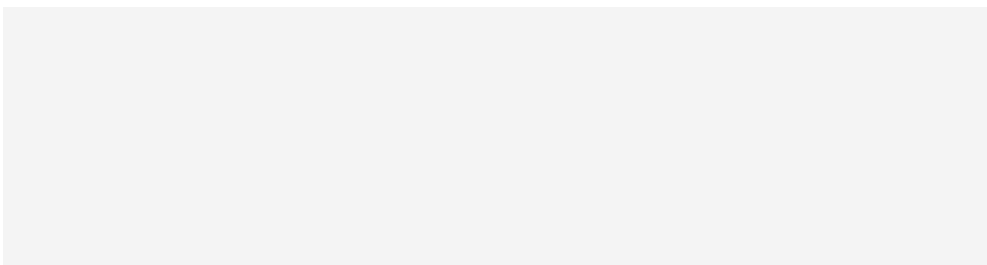
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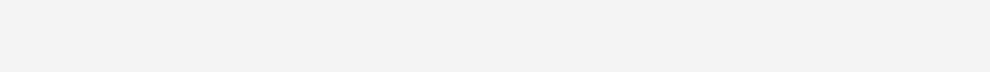
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"My story seeks to inspire my entire community to believe in them and show that they can achieve everything they set out to do," Bracho wrote in an email.





Since arriving from Ecuador a year and a half ago, “I set out to give my best, I worked on a project on the Latino community to inspire my community to fight for our dreams and express how we feel and what the reality of our situation is,” he wrote.

“Facing new challenges was not easy but working with dedication and focus everything is possible...” he continued. “I have been working daily for a more inclusive and empathetic community.”

He wrote about the uniqueness of the Monarch butterfly: “...something peculiarly interesting is that I made the monarch butterfly with blue color in my art class although they are orange, to show that everyone can create their fantasy.”

For Rueckert it was her deep family roots in Old Saybrook that made her essay distinctive.

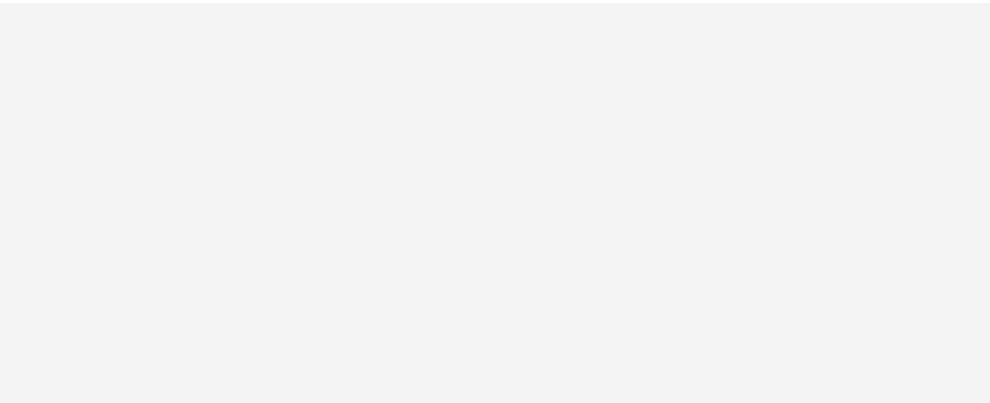


“They owned a tavern back in the 1700s,” said Sara Menga, “so she has this true New England heritage, which we felt was really important to include, to make our mural not just be about diversity through race, but again, through their talents and history.”

Menga is an art teacher at Old Saybrook High School.

Nick Chacha worked closely with Newton and Menga to bring the mural to the life.

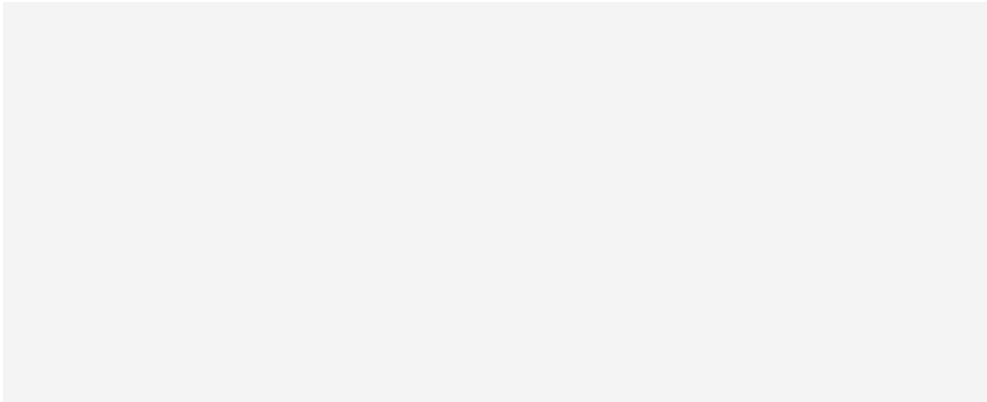
“Along with him being a really strong artist and flourishing in our room, we also saw him as a strong peer within the ELL (English Language Learners) program,” said Newton, standing in front of the mural, scrubbing paint off her hands with a white washcloth.



“It started off with a few families coming to our school from different countries, like just dropping in here, not knowing any English, and Nick has a similar experience where he learned English by starting off in our school system, because he grew up in an Ecuadorian household,” she said. “He really became a leader within that group of kids and the art and the culture, it all started really mixing together.”

Nick Chacha talked about growing up around art.

“I grew watching my uncle paint and draw and he used to do it a lot and he was really good,” this 18-year-old said. “He used to sell his paintings.”

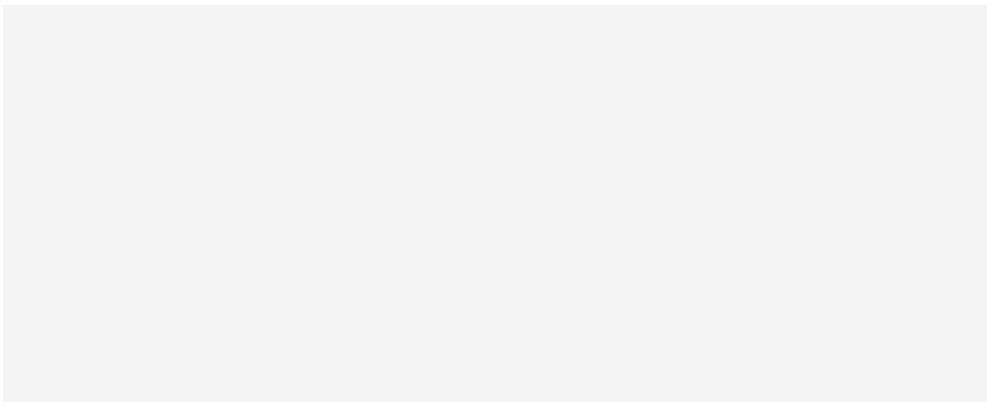


It was Nick Chacha’s immersion in high school art that allowed him “to improve and to progress.” He recalled that it was the suggestion from teachers that he incorporate his art into his senior project.

“Because I am so proud of my heritage and of all my friends, I was like, I should do something to make everyone feel comfortable,” the incoming senior said. “I know a lot of people from difference countries and I know it can be hard for them to feel accepted or comfortable, at least for a little while, where they are.”

From this idea came the creation of the mural. Blanco was paid, through the school system, a total of \$7,000.

This artist felt an immediate connection with the project.

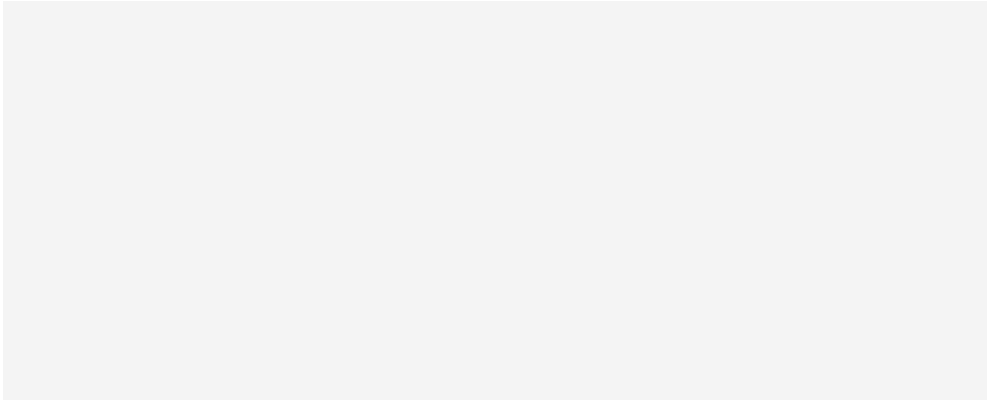


“Whenever I can I like to focus on diversity,” he said, taking a break from his long day of painting. “Why? Because I’m an immigrant. I’m from Spain, my wife is from Mexico, our kids were born here. So, personally it is fascinating to me how beautiful

Blanco completed the mural in a week's time, from June 14-21.

He started the work with chalk, moving onto house paint in blue, red, green, yellow, purple and orange and finished with a coat of sealer that "protects the surface for many years to come," he said.

He chose to use vibrant colors and a drip method, so that the faces of the students are multicolored.



"I was interested in leaving the skin color out and bringing (in) all the colors in a way that they are mingling," the artist said.

"Color, for me, is very important," he said. "Part of my work, I want to express how the color of our skin should not define who you are."

"I think we are forgetting our commonalities of the human race," he said.

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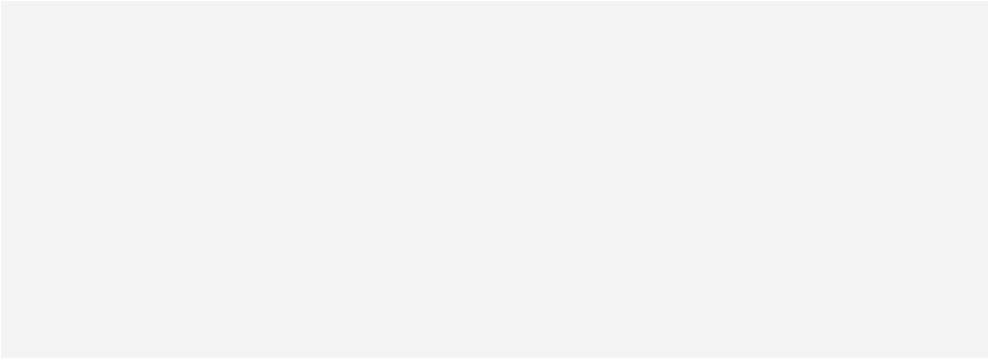
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Blanco talked about why he chose to portray the students with the drips of vibrant colors.

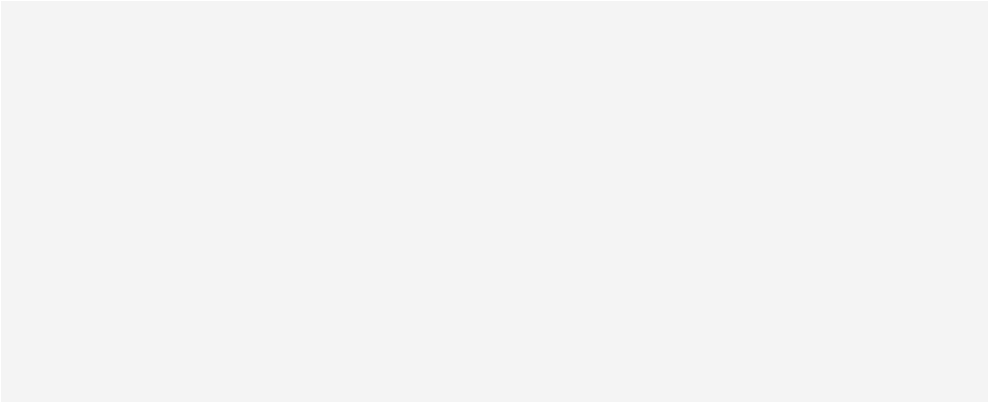


“Each of us, we are like one of those drips,” Blanco said, standing in front of the nearly-finished mural.

“We are unique,” he said. “Each of those drips is just different and original and unique, in one way, but also, all those drips, they are similar.”

Nick Chacha’s brother, Teddy Chacha is featured in the work, forming his hands in a heart shape.

“Teddy is mainly blues and greens, but he also has some yellows and you go to Ariana and its mainly yellow, plus she has blues and greens,” Blanco said.

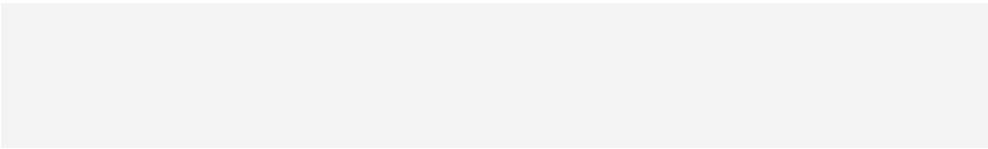


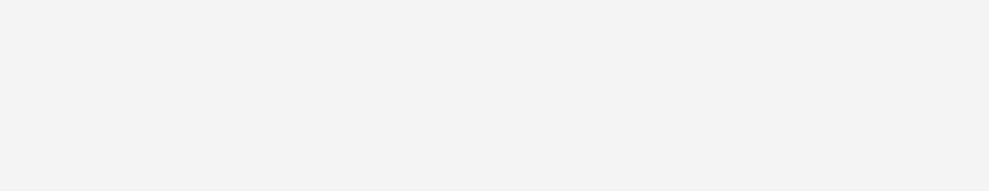
“What I’m trying to say is that we may be certainly different, but we are all part of each other,” he said. “We have different cultures and we celebrate that, but we are still human, we still have those commonalities.”

Blanco talked about the transformation of the wall within the span of week and the impact it has had on the community.

“I think the most amazing thing about the project, and about public art, is this wall was gray, empty, blank ... maybe ugly, and now it is something special that it has many different layers,” Blanco said.

“To me, that something so simple can motivate, can stimulate, can bring the town together,” he said. “I’ve been here for a week now and, in a way, it has been one of the most difficult murals to finish because it has had so much of an impact that it was difficult to paint.”



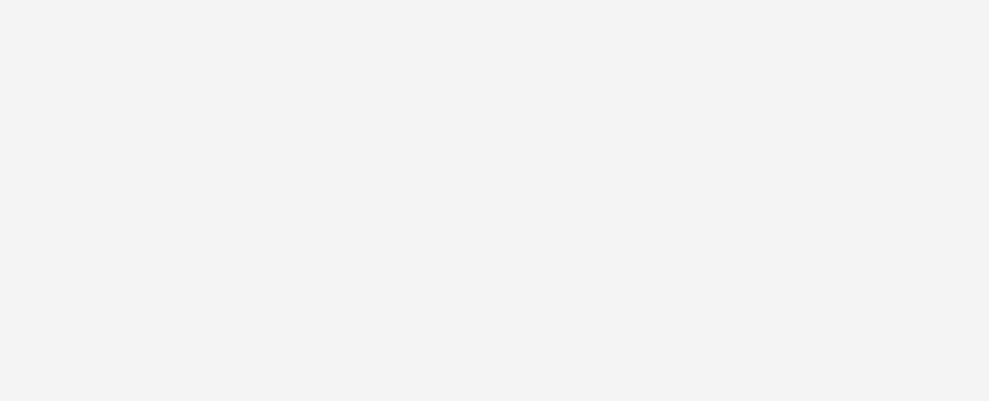


While he admitted it may take a little time to fully comprehend the affect of the work on him, personally, he had some thoughts.

“I think one of the reasons is that in smaller communities there is more of an impact,” he said. “This is really different and I think people were expecting to see a lighthouse, a landscape, a boat.”

Watching the finishing touches added to the mural, Samantha Walsh talked about the project.

“I just think it’s mind blowing,” Walsh said.



“It’s just beautiful,” the 14-year-old said. “It shocks me that a guy can do this, to this scale, to the detail. It’s amazing.”

Beyond the actual artistry, the incoming Old Saybrook High School freshman said she appreciates the message.

“I just love what it represents for Old Saybrook,” she said. “I like how the center is Teddy Chacha with the heart. It really just brings diversity and love into this town.”

For Blanco, it was an enlightening experience to be a part of this project.





circle of many different layers that we didn't know we were going to get this far," he said.

"Whenever I go to places, there is an idea and you never know the outcome, you never know how much of an impact, you never know how much a collaboration it's going to be," he said. "You never know how many of the kids were going to help and at the end, it's been overwhelmingly a success because everyone wanted to participate."

Written By  
[Sarah Page Kyrccz](#)

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