

# Imaginative Emojis

*GETC students beautify campus with expressions of the heart*



The students agreed upon 12 emojis, 12 expressions of their feelings, as the basis for their mural. Local artist and naturalist, Robin Whitfield, who had coached the young artists at Grenada Enrichment and Transition Center, explained the project as she fitted one of the last tiles into place. Emojis, Whitfield said, are cartoonish, little faces used to convey emotions online. The students dreamed up the emojis, then brought them to life by painting them onto wooden tiles. The mosaic covers a 10-foot-by-10-foot section of the hallway.

Moving left to right, from the top, downward, the initial impression one gets of the first, globular visage, rendered in squares of wintry blue, with a fracas of white, straw-like hair, jutting out like a laurel wreath, is of an imp, somewhat agrarian, like Puck from “A Midsummer Night’s Dream.” The discomfiture of the mouth is troubling, though. It’s not quite snarling, but it’s clearly less than enthused, a bit vinegary,

very different from the honeyed, frolicking disposition of Shakespeare’s woodsy merrymaker. The next face might be Kermit the Frog’s sister – well, his evil sister. She’s green, of course, with a feathery sweep of Farrah Fawcett hair, but she’s lacking the bewitching prettiness of Charley’s most popular angel. Perhaps it’s her blistering scowl.

Most people know emojis by using them on social media sites, like Facebook. They’re like coins of cultural currency among Millennials, navigational beacons that help them steer through the ambiguously silent waters of written texts. Just in case the abbreviation “LOL” or “laughing out loud,” which, although it’s only about a decade old, is worn smooth as a river stone, doesn’t quite make clear one’s bursting amusement, the “laughing till I cry” emoji, with a toothsome grin and streaming tears, leaves little to the imagination.

### Symbolic language

The range of emotions depicted in the emojis appeals to every student, Whitfield said. “This

pixelated imagery showed up on my radar when I was playing the videogame Minecraft with my nephew,” she added. Whitfield held out her arms, her green, paint-flecked Starbucks’ barista’s apron untied from her waist and dangling around her neck. With school drawing rapidly to a close, the hallway was unnaturally quiet. Whitfield raked her hair from her face with the back of her wrist, like someone used to having paint or some other transmittable substance on their hands. “This just feels like teenagers to me,” she said.

The great, Irish writer Oscar Wilde once said that art is neither moral nor immoral. The same might be said of social media and other ways of being in community online: they are value-neutral, both nourishing and poisonous, depending on how they’re used.

According to Ashley Harrell, a counselor at Grenada Middle School, online interaction has become a central component in students’ lives. “Social media is a great way to stay connected and increases students’ knowl-

edge of technology, which is paramount,” said Harrell. Students can bridge miles and even continents to share ideas, Harrell said, as well as keep up healthy, filial bonds.

Life online is also fraught with peril, Harrell cautioned. Cyber bullying has replaced taking another kid’s lunch money as the most notorious form of schoolyard coercion.

Whitfield nodded for sixth-grader Jarvis Johnson to climb the stepladder. With his thumb and forefinger, Johnson carefully fitted the screwdriver bit into the groove, then squeezed the drill trigger, sinking the screw and anchoring the corner of another tile. The image had spiked hair, a menacingly furrowed brow and teeth that looked to have been sharpened with a file. The profile was blazoned in combative swaths of cerulean and magenta, encircled by a corona of indigo.

Cyber consciousness, according to Harrell, is a seminal virtue in today’s world. “Remember, your importance is not based on the number of likes

your Facebook status receives,” said Harrell.

### Unifying expression

As they finished their last assignments for the year, students poked their heads out of classrooms like prairie dogs, hoping to get in on the drilling and general racket-making. Sixth-grader D.J. Smith was content to hang back and observe, at least for the moment.

“Emojis are a different kind of language,” said Smith. “They show your emotions in a unique way, through a visual image.” Cordesia Sykes agreed. “You don’t have to spell out what you’re feeling, but emojis get your point across, anyway,” Sykes said, pushing her tiny hands out in a giving gesture.

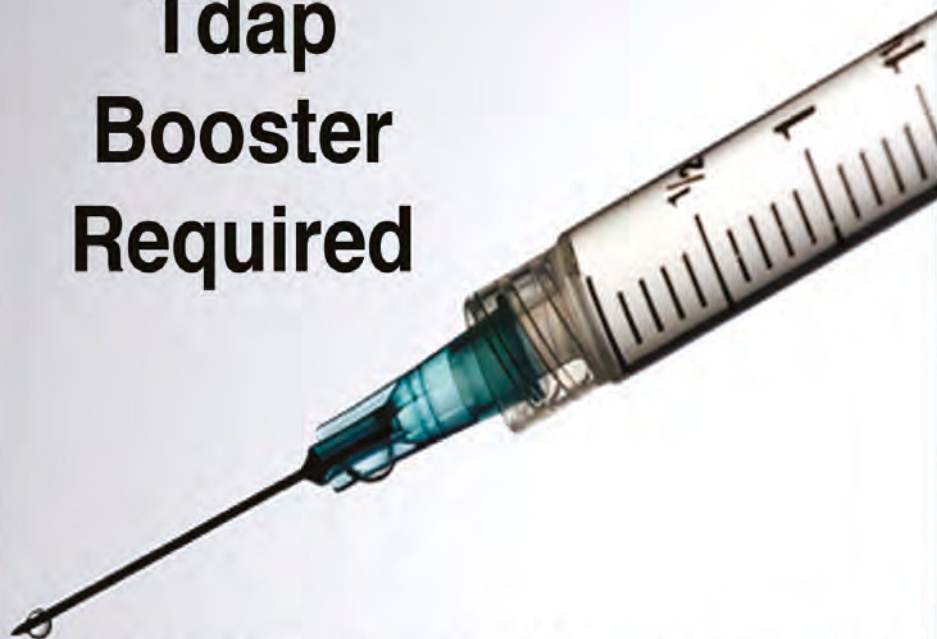
“You don’t have to say it out loud,” chimed in Floyd Yates, laughing, uncertainly at first, then, suddenly, realizing the irony of his interjection.

As Whitfield sees it, emojis are unique extensions of cyber life. They’re images, almost perfectly evocative of the contemporary, cultural moment, expressions of values that are important both online and off. Emojis are symbols, Whitfield said, helpful, if not vitally important, born of cyber life, to help young people express complex and hard-to-articulate emotions.

“So many forces are driving us apart today, trying to create fear,” said Whitfield. “Our hope is that this piece will represent the ways in which we can authentically communicate, in which we can come together and be unified.”

## Attention 7th Grade Students

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