

Appleton Artist Neo Medina Uses Murals to Engage, Inspire Students

By: Audrey Lopez-Stane, WIPPS Student Journalist

APPLETON, Wis. -- Mexican-American artist Neo Medina shares his journey battling discrimination through the influential murals he paints across Appleton.



As a Sheboygan native, it wasn't easy for Medina to grow up in a predominately white city. Though a lot of the hardships in his life come from being raised in a white community, he uses art to connect with others who have faced similar experiences.

Medina makes his art because "it's not easy to be Black or brown," and he is happy knowing that his art is a gift he can offer the world.

Medina strives to give marginalized groups the voices they need to be successful. That's why his murals center around melanated youth and aim to spread messages of love and inclusivity. Medina wants them to see themselves as capable, beautiful, and worthy of love.

Most often, businesses and locations reach out to Medina asking for his work because it is so important and impactful.

“The city's got my back,” he said.

Though the murals require a large time commitment, Medina aims to paint five to six each year. The painstaking process includes drafting, sketching, gathering supplies, and finally painting. Medina’s murals can take anywhere from a couple of days to a couple of months to complete.

Medina admits it is a difficult job despite being proud and satisfied with his work in the end. Family is important to his values and artwork; while his loved ones help with the events and paintings, he takes breaks in the winter to spend more time with them.

“Being away from family is pretty hard,” Medina said, pausing to say goodbye to his wife before she left for the day.

He has proudly run his second annual Paint the City program in collaboration with Appleton Area School District. This year's program and celebration is held at the Boys and Girls Club of the Fox Valley in downtown Appleton.

‘I’m going to give this a shot’



At the Toward One Wisconsin Conference held in April, Medina spoke about his involvement in the STAR program. The organization, which was first created in 2018, helps build equitable educational opportunities and provides mentorship options for Black students.

The goal of STAR is to close the achievement gap between white students and students of color. Though it is running and thriving in the Appleton Area School District, the program was not reinstated for an additional year in a neighboring school district in 2021, which threatened the program's ongoing success.

"The kids, they were hurt," Medina said.

Medina was moved to risk something and to try to keep the STAR program running because he wanted his students to know that they can chase their dreams and make change.

He said he wanted to stick up for students of color. While he was initially going to leave the program once it moved school districts, Medina decided to try one last time when he heard assistant superintendent Mike Hernandez's plan for the STAR program in Appleton.

"I heard him speak one time and I decided right then, 'okay, I'm going to give this a shot,'" Medina said.

Just when he had lost faith in the system, Medina found hope from Hernandez's vision for the students and program he adored that is still running in Appleton today.