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Mural an outlet for at-risk youths



FAVE MURMAN/Courier-Post

Wesley Perez, 18, said the mural project was a positive experience for him.

Kids' artistry perks up wall of Camden office building

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CAMDEN

The mosaic mural dedicated Wednesday in the lobby of the Aletha R. Wright Administration Building that is now beautifying an otherwise nondescript wall in a city office building has already made a difference in the lives of nearly a dozen at-risk city youth.

The tile mosaic, unveiled by Freeholder Riletta Cream, was designed and assembled by youth who have come under the auspices of the Camden-based Center for Family Services.

The project, featuring a variety of New Jersey icons — both people and places — was coordinated by Philadelphia-based Network Arts, established 15 years ago to help youngsters express themselves through art.

The program is funded by Campbell Soup Foundation, with the Center for Family Services recruiting the artists.

"We use mostly teens with family issues or school problems. We're looking for positive experiences for them and they create something positive in the community. It's win-win-win," said Richard Stagiano, president and CEO of the Center for Family Services.

The center has partnered



FAVE MURMAN/Courier-Post

The mosaic in the Aletha R. Wright Administration Building was unveiled Wednesday.

with Network Arts for six years, resulting in murals at such sites as Campbell's Field, the Camden Public Library and the Walter Rand Transportation Center.

The most recent project has made a difference for Wesley Perez, 18, who had been brought up on aggravated assault charges following a fight at Woodrow Wilson High School. He was placed in a Camden group home and assigned to the mural project.

He and other youths helped give input into what would appear in the mural and worked on completing it over nearly three months' time.

Perez embraced the project, even though art was new to him, working on the River-

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sharks logo, a depiction of the Battleship New Jersey and a portrait of Albert Einstein.

"I didn't look at it in a bad way. I learned from it and turned it into something positive," Perez said. "People would come by every day and compliment us on helping Camden out. It made me feel good about myself and made me want to improve myself and do better."

Now living back home with his mother, Perez is enrolled in Hopeworks 'N Camden, a program that provides technology training to inner-city youth. Perez is taking Web training and hopes to get a job producing Web sites.

Because Camden County College is a partner in the program, Perez will be receiving college credits and will begin college classes in January. Once he gets 30 credits, he'll receive a high school diploma.

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