Mural an outlet for at-risk youths

Wesley Perez, 13, 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 is now beautifying an otherwise nondescript wall in a city office building and has made a difference in the lives of nearly a dozen at-risk youth.

The tile mosaic, unveiled by Freeholder Alleta Creamer, 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, the Center for Family Services recruiting the artists.

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

The center has partnered with Network Arts for six years, resulting in murals at each site as Campbell's Field, the Camden Public Library and the Walter Reed 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-