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Glimpses of the Collier High School hallways beckoning in spring with the help of excerpts from Amanda Gorman's poem "The Hill We Climb" (Maddie Thompson)



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Editor's note: *Notes from the Field includes reports from young people volunteering in ministries of Catholic sisters. A partnership with Catholic Volunteer Network, the project began in the summer of 2015.*

A task Collier High School students in studio arts undertake in a typical year involves painting the high school windows with a poem and artwork to welcome in each new season. There are about 25 large windows that each get covered with snowflakes, fall leaves, pumpkins, flowers and more, depending on the time of year. The students spend an entire day scraping old artwork and poetry off the windows before covering sponges and brushes in paint to usher in a new season. This tradition brings color and life into our hallways.

Because of safety concerns about the coronavirus, the students were unable to help paint the windows this school year. Instead, I took on the responsibility of cleaning the windows and redecorating them to welcome in our next season of spring.

After a few weeks back in person in January, our entire school switched to remote learning for two weeks out of an abundance of caution because of a coronavirus exposure. During this time, I committed to cleaning and painting the windows before students returned to campus. Each day after school during this remote-learning period, I chipped away at the cleaning process. To my surprise, I often found one or two windows cleaned in my absence. I wondered if any staff members had been visiting the school and helping me with the task. After asking around for a week, I was no closer to finding the unsung Collier hero.

With supplies from the art room, I set to work transcribing excerpts from Amanda Gorman's poem "The Hill We Climb," which she shared at the 2021 presidential inauguration.

As I copied her words onto the windows, I felt as though I was carrying her message into our classrooms, hallways and lunchrooms. Beneath Gorman's words, I painted flowers of all colors, shapes and sizes.

As I was nearing the end of the painting process one evening, Andrea, a member of our incredible cleaning crew, stopped to compliment my flowers. After sharing my

thanks, I asked if she had helped with the clearing and cleaning of the windows the week before. Andrea nodded and smiled, explaining that when she was not too busy cleaning the rest of the school, she worked to clear the windows for a short time.

I was overcome with gratitude for this woman who shared her time, energy and elbow grease to help me fill the halls of Collier with a little beauty. Keeping our school doors open during a pandemic places extra burdens on those who work tirelessly to keep our campus clean and safe. Andrea, like many others at Collier, simply stepped up to do the work in front of her without being prompted.



Cleaning a window at Collier High School to prepare for the next season (Maddie Thompson)

Andrea's witness models how each small task at Collier is not simply part of the job, but rather contributes to a larger mission. At Collier, we plant seeds and care for what begins to bud. However, this work is always a team effort, and it takes a village to build a healthy environment for true growth.

During these two weeks of remote learning, I was reminded of the moments before a harvest, the quiet before a bloom. As I painted daisies and tulips of all colors on the windows, I thought of the many colors our students carry onto this campus, the way our students uniquely bring themselves into this quiet space in the woods. The campus becomes holy ground each time our students christen it with their presence, struggles and joys.

School during a pandemic has been by no means easy or without obstacles. In many ways, Collier's ability to teach our students in person has been a great blessing. Most of our students are better able to thrive when in person and on campus.

However, in-person instruction has also been exhausting. Wearing masks, social distancing, using desk barriers, postponing clubs and activities, occasionally switching to remote learning and experiencing unreliable internet connections, dealing with difficult home situations, feeling separated from community, losing family and friends, and more have gradually chipped away at our resilience.

Amanda Gorman's words resonate in a particular way as I think back on the first half of our school year:

> Let the globe, if nothing else, say this is true:
>
> That even as we grieved, we grew
>
> That even as we hurt, we hoped
>
> That even as we tired, we tried

As we experienced loss and change this year, we discovered community and creativity. As we encountered new obstacles and wounds, we were continually inspired by fellow students or staff members. As we grew weary of remote learning and physical distancing, we recommitted to keeping one another safe.

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Gorman's words, now dancing amid a mural of wildflowers in Collier High School, remind us of the obstacles we have had to overcome this year and provide us strength for the many more we will face before the school year is over.

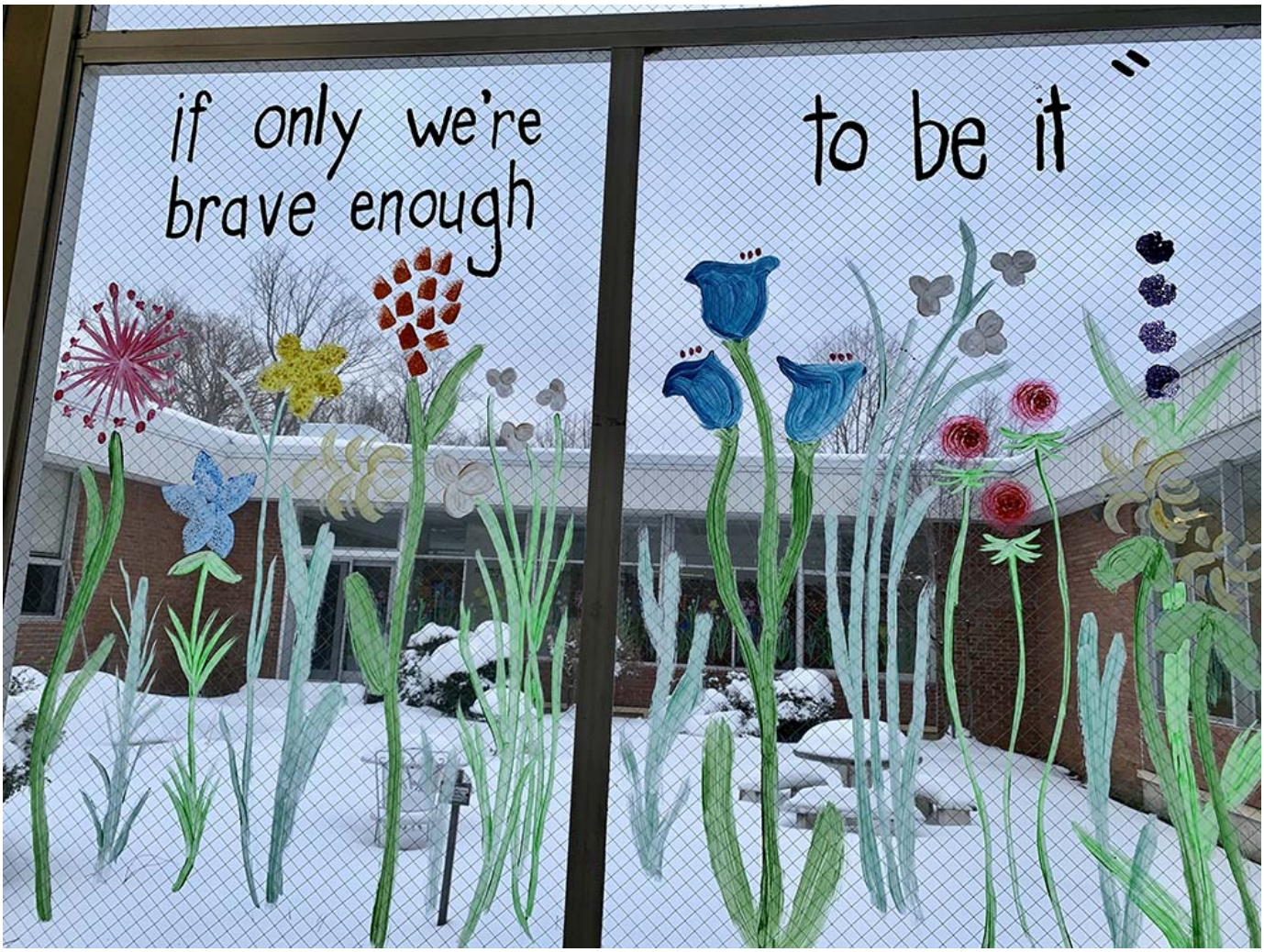
I began painting the flowers on the Collier windows just as the Northeast was hit with a major snowstorm. With nearly 2 feet of snow on campus, it was difficult for me to even open the building doors. However, I smiled to myself while painting as I looked beyond my paintbrush and transparent canvas to what lay beyond the windows. The powdery snow created a stark contrast for the colorful flowers. The background of the cold winter was greeted by a mural of blooming and bright flowers.

This image was reflected in Gorman's closing words:

> When day comes we step out of the shade,
>
> aflame and unafraid
>
> The new dawn blooms as we free it
>
> For there is always light,
>
> If only we're brave enough to see it
>
> If only we're brave enough to be it

Amid a difficult year, the hallways of Collier were brimming with life and color, waiting for the students' laughter to provide water and sunlight for growth. When we cannot find the strength or hope to continue in difficult times, we need not turn far

for inspiration to bloom.



A quote from Amanda Gorman's poem "The Hill We Climb" on windows at Collier High School (Maddie Thompson)

This story appears in the **Notes from the Field** feature series. View the full series.