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Whitefish High School student Cheyenne Stubblefield paints her mural on a downtown storm drain. (Julie Engler/Whitefish Pilot)

New colorful murals on City sidewalks carry vital message about storm drains

By JULIE ENGLER
Whitefish pilot

Several city sidewalks in Whitefish were recently graced with artworks that are designed to make people take a second look and think about what is entering the storm drains.

Whenever it rains, all the water — and whatever else flows into the drains, including trash, oil, gasoline, pet waste, fertilizer and natural debris — is carried directly to the Whitefish River or Whitefish Lake. This kind of pollution is called nonpoint source pollution

and it is an important topic in Eric Sawtelle's AP Environmental Science class at Whitefish High School. Students analyze water samples and investigate the effects of nonpoint source pollution on nearby rivers and lakes.

With the idea of pursuing a cross-curricular project, Sawtelle reached out to Claire Kniveton and her Advanced Art class as well as Cynthia Ingelfinger with the Whitefish Lake Institute and Emilie Henry, the nonpoint source coordinator with the Flathead Basin Commission. Together they

have worked to make the community more aware of nonpoint source pollution and how everything that runs into storm drains goes directly into the local waterways.

"When it rains, all the water that lands on hard surfaces flows into storm drains and is carried directly to our waterways so any pollutants that the stormwater picks up from the landscape are introduced directly," said Ingelfinger, the WLI Science and

See Murals, A6

Murals

from A1

Education Director.

According to the EPA, non-point source pollutants can harm fish and wildlife populations, kill native vegetation, foul drinking water supplies and make recreational areas unsafe and unpleasant.

"Citizens think that stormwater is treated, so they think that it goes to the wastewater treatment plant, and it doesn't," Ingelfinger explains, stating that it heads toward freshwater sources instead.

In order to call attention to the importance of keeping Whitefish's waterways clean, 20 of Kniveton's advanced art students designed colorful murals that depict the wide range of plants and animals that rely on clean waterways.

Along with dragonflies, plankton, bugs and plants, the murals and other storm drains include the reminder, "Water Only - Drains to River" to encourage people to be mindful about what goes down the drains.

"The purpose of the art is to remind observers where stormwater flows after it enters the drain so we can try to keep our water bodies cleaner," Ingelfinger said.

The murals are painted on the sidewalks above the storm drains on Railway Street, First Street and Second Street in Whitefish. Students completed their murals over the last two weeks and it served as their final project for Advanced Art.

The students' illustrations are intended to call attention to a rarely noticed piece of infrastructure, storm drains, and remind residents and visitors that our neighborhoods are directly connected to the nearby waterways.

"It's awesome that the students have this opportunity to express the idea that water is such a valuable resource and we're lucky to have as much water as we do in Montana," Kniveton said. "I'm excited that they get to create art that sends that message."

The hope is that if people understand that stormwater flows untreated to our lakes and streams, they will be more conscious of potential pollut-



Whitefish High School's Advance Art class students who created murals to call attention to the storm drains downtown and to nonpoint source pollution. Back row: Cheyenne Stubblefield, Addison Blackaby, Layla Sheeran, Maci Safir, Kelly Howeth, Soledad Gerg, Ashley Gunset, Piper Dudley, Shannon Freeman, Skye Horowitz, Erin Wilde Front row: Claire Kniveton, Cynthia Ingelfinger, Marie Comes at Night, Syndey Buckmaster, Faith Arakaki (Julie Engler/Whitefish Pilot)

ants, Ingelfinger expressed.

People can help by picking up dog waste, using less fertilizer and making sure cars aren't leaking fluids. It is the day-to-day things that contribute to nonpoint source pollution.

According to the Whitefish Lake Institute, when these pollutants enter local waterways, they not only pollute the water but also make it difficult for fish and other aquatic wildlife to live or even breathe. Some pollutants can even pose a health hazard for humans.

Ingelfinger explains that most of Whitefish's drinking water comes from Haskill Basin, but during the summer months or when the flow is low in Haskill Creek, the city switches over and incorporates some water from Whitefish Lake, so the dirtier the lake, the more treatment the water needs.

In addition to hurting plants and animals and affecting drinking water, nonpoint source pollution also causes sediment that can increase turbidity so water is "not as clear and not as pretty," Ingelfinger noted.

"For a community that depends on our waterways for



Whitefish High School's Advanced Art student Skye Horowitz sits beside her mural on a downtown storm drain. (Julie Engler/Whitefish Pilot)

recreation, we are super reliant on clean water in lakes and rivers," she added.

Point source pollution comes from a single, identifiable source and can be regulated and controlled. What makes nonpoint source pollution problematic is that there is not one place where it enters the

waterways. It can even come from poorly maintained septic systems.

"Nonpoint pollution is harder to see, harder to understand, harder to monitor and impossible to regulate," said Ingelfinger.