



A variety of inspirational messages — the “Signs of Hope” — dot the Port Townsend High School campus, where, from left, Sage Wyatt, Jasmine Hansen and Gabby Newton head for class. (Diane Urbani de la Paz/Peninsula Daily News)

# ‘Signs of Hope’ created for Port Townsend School District campuses

Artwork posted to inspire students throughout town

By [Diane Urbani de la Paz](#)

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PORT TOWNSEND — “Stay strong.” “Be who you are.” “You are not alone.”

These are a few of the “Signs of Hope,” hand-painted messages posted on and around Port Townsend’s public schools.

The words are plain and powerful. On the hillside just outside Port Townsend High School, a solar-yellow sign reads “Be the light,” as poet Amanda Gorman wrote in her Inauguration Day work, “The Hill We Climb.”



Out in front of Blue Heron Middle School, another sign simply states: “You are loved.”

These signs are “for all the kids in our community,” said school district Superintendent Sandy Gessner-Crabtree, who came up with the idea.

Working with the school maintenance crew, art teachers, school counselors and youngsters across three campuses, the superintendent had 30 signs of hope installed at Salish Coast Elementary, Blue Heron and the high school.

The project took much longer than Gessner-Crabtree thought it would, but she persisted, determined to “share the hope,” as she put it.

“Last fall, when we were about ready to enter the time change, we were really worried about the kids. I care deeply about their emotional safety,” she said, adding her office had gotten reports of students who were struggling.

“What’s it going to be like when it’s dark most of the day?” Gessner-Crabtree wondered.





The Port Townsend School District has posted “signs of hope” on the campuses of Salish Coast Elementary, Blue Heron Middle School and Port Townsend High School. (Diane Urbani de la Paz/Peninsula Daily News)

The art teachers — Michele Soderstrom at the high school, Christie Boyd at the middle school and Wanda Leclerc at Salish Coast — took a different approach with painting the signs, while all sport vibrant colors: purple, red, gold, cobalt blue.

Leclerc collaborated with volunteers to paint the signs arrayed at her school while Soderstrom worked with students who came to the art room for support.

“Some signs have layers of work from three different students,” Soderstrom said.

After months of planning and construction, the Signs of Hope appeared in February at the front of each campus and along the edges.

Their messages can be seen on the streets bordering the high school, in keeping with Gessner-Crabtree’s desire to communicate with any youth who might need a lift.

“It’s a very grassroots effort to inspire our kids — all kids throughout the city,” she said.

“We’re going to get through this. It’ll be hard, but we will get through.”

Gessner-Crabtree saluted the school district's "fabulous maintenance crew" as well. The trio who built, primed and installed the signs are Justin Gray, Shane Trammell and Andy Kithcart.

Their work will stand, the superintendent said, throughout the school year and into the summer.

Back at Soderstrom's classroom — the high school's mural-covered standalone building — teenagers continue to paint, sketch, sculpt and contend with the pandemic.

Throughout April, youngsters from Port Townsend High, Blue Heron and Salish Coast Elementary went to work on Art Wave, the annual public art exhibition in Port Townsend's historic Uptown and downtown districts.

In this collaboration with the Main Street Program, scores of original works will adorn storefronts and businesses during the month of May.

"Art is a good way to express things," student Silas Cotton, 14, said when asked about his work on the Signs of Hope.

His classmate Khileigh Tindall, also 14, added that artmaking works for her when she's feeling angry — at herself or at the world.

And if she could choose a couple of messages for signs to put up on campus, they would say "Be respectful" and "Stop bullying."

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Jefferson County senior reporter Diane Urbani de la Paz can be reached at 360-417-3509 or [durbanidelapaz@peninsuladailynews.com](mailto:durbanidelapaz@peninsuladailynews.com).