

Candace Printz, MAE

Professional Project



TRASH  
TO  
TREASURE

*by Candace Yvette Printz*

**A Reflection on the Land**

Driving in El Paso, I turned on to the Montana highway, east bound. On the left side of Montana, there is the vast Chihuahuan desert. The mountains, slightly purple in the distance, contrasted beautifully against the tans of the sand and the green splotches of desert plants. Occasionally there was a rabbit or roadrunner scurrying across the highway, narrowly missing the tires of cars containing people driving to work. On the right side of Montana, there was evidence of human encroachment on the desert and its many little inhabitants.

The first thing I saw was the multitude of fast food restaurants lining the strip, enticing commuters to stop in. I pulled in quickly to order a breakfast taquito before making my way to El Dorado High School. As I sat in line at the drive-through, I stared off into the desert. I was reminded of all the work that lay ahead for my students and I wondered how we would accomplish it together. I watched as the morning breeze blew plastic bags across the highway, only to get caught in a creosote bush. My eyes traveled from this to the line of litter along the shoulder of the highway. There were Styrofoam cups, straws, paper plates, and a plethora of unidentifiable plastics strewn across the landscape. I felt disappointed, bewildered, and a bit panicked. My art students and I



## FIGURE 1

*Volunteer picking up trash at cleanup.  
Author Image.*

had a lot of work to do to clean this area of debris, but it would be a journey worth having (Figure 1).

### **The Journey Begins**

About eight years ago, my high school students and I came up with a community service project idea related to art making. The art club kids and I were meeting after school one Monday to discuss the pollution issues we had noticed around our school, which lies on the outskirts of El Paso, Texas. They suggested that we

collect all the trash in the area and turn it into a sculpture that would make people pause and consider consumption, waste, and littering. We wanted to shock people into the realization that the garbage in our own backyard was hurting the land, animals, and people. We knew that we had some responsibility for stewardship, but no attempt at creating that sculpture was ever made. Nevertheless, the seed of an idea had been planted.

In 2016, I thought back to that conversation when I saw a brochure

advertising a national contest called the *Get Going Day* with Chelsea Clinton. The call asked teachers to submit a community service idea involving students in the betterment of their community and in response to the challenge made by Chelsea Clinton in her book *It's Your World* (2017). In the book, Clinton discussed the power of young people and how they, no matter their age, can change the world. I ran home to create a proposal for the contest.

I proposed that we adopt a section

of the highway and clean it up. After we collected the trash, we would wash, sort, and inventory everything. I wanted us to organize and keep all the items so we could repurpose them for creative endeavors. The ultimate goal was to get people thinking about these materials in a different way. Instead of seeing these items as garbage to be ignored, I wanted students to become entangled with them—to react to their materiality and see them as inseparable from life and living. In order to make sure that people had the education to create artwork or other creative items from these materials, I also proposed we host free workshops to teach people different ways to recycle and repurpose the materials in order to promote the arts and environmentalism. Furthermore, after the cleanup and workshop phases, I thought we could host our own regional art competition for all ages, asking contestants to use recycled materials in the submitted works. A reception and awards would also be part of the showcase.

Local non-profits including the Make-a-Wish Foundation, the Humane Society of El Paso, and the Chihuahuan Desert Education Coalition would act as our partners in both the cleanup and

**“I wanted students to become entangled... materiality as inseparable from life and living.”**





workshops. In turn, we would donate money to their organizations by allowing artists in the regional art competition the opportunity to sell their artwork and donate the proceeds to one of the three organizations. I decided to include non-profits because I realized that all of us, in our own ways, were trying to make our city a better place. Even though we had different missions and motivations, we were all about creating a better world to live in. I believed that we could be stronger when united in our efforts. Eight months later, my proposal had won the national contest. I was completely floored. A whirlwind of emotions came over me. Finally, it sunk in that we now had to take this idea and make the planning phase a reality in two weeks, since Chelsea Clinton herself would visit us then. The project proposed for the contest lasted from 2016-2017 but I and the school continue with this important work every year.

While we prepared for Clinton's visit, I began to realize also how much team work was really needed to make it all happen. We required a website, social media accounts, and a PowerPoint presentation for the audience of students, teachers, non-profits, artists, and potential sponsors; we also needed to complete the forms to adopt the highway



## FIGURE 2.

*Chelsea Clinton with students at presentation. Author Image.*

## FIGURE 3.

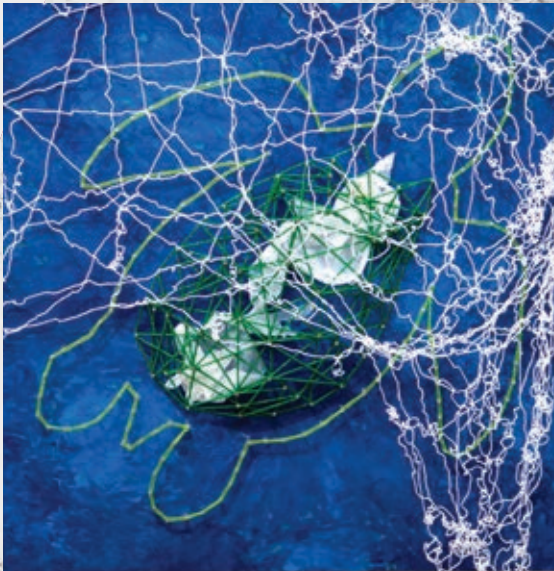
*El Dorado High School students cleaning up trash from the desert. Author Image.*

## FIGURE 4.

*It's Your World class, 2017. Author Image.*

## FIGURE 5.

*It's Your World class giving a recycled art workshop to the Girl Scouts. Author Image.*



## FIGURE 6.

*Andrea Vasquez's artwork, Open Your Eyes - Darkness is Coming. Author Image.*

off of Montana, print brochures, create an RSVP list, a press release, and get the gym ready for a rally with the rest of the school. I tried to do everything by myself at first, but quickly realized that if we wanted this done right, it would require me to let go and allow others to be a part of it. That was the lesson that I had learned during the two weeks before Clinton's arrival and have kept with me every year we have done the project. By allowing students, teachers, community members, and parents to help me, we all were a part of something together.

All our efforts paid off when Clinton arrived. We greeted her outside the school and she met the teachers and chatted with everyone freely. She willingly took pictures with people before being swept away to our presentation in the theater. Students gave the presentation, discussed their ideas, and invited the audience to join the project. Afterwards, Clinton spoke at length about how amazed she was with the creativity and passion they exuded. She wanted to know what would be done for the showcase and expressed interest in seeing the results first-hand. I told her that she should come back at the end of the year and see the exhibition. She agreed (Figure 2).

### **Our Involvement in the Project: Cleanups, Workshops, and Creations**

Once the cleanups were scheduled, we purchased our gloves, sunscreen, bug spray, first aid kits, safety vests, and bags and hit the road. We met at a gas station off Montana and went over the safety rules. I was disgusted after realizing how much trash was picked up on our first trips. We found thousands of expected and unexpected items and hauled off hundreds of bags of trash from a small area. We collected over three thousand beer bottles, fireworks, tires, roofing materials, carpeting, plastic bags, cigarette butts, nails, Styrofoam, fast food containers, straws, receipts, and toys. We found money, high school diplomas, a glass eye, a ring of keys, photos from the 1980s, letters, mounds of clothes, dishwashers, couches, mattresses, televisions, and washing machines. It really put things into perspective for my students and the other volunteers who pitched in. We sometimes wondered if the littering was done by individuals or companies. We also noted that learning through first-hand experiences was so much more powerful than just reading about the environment. Students told me that it would be so much worse if we were not there. They would talk about how if we did not collect the debris, local wildlife would be harmed, and if we did not share the opportunity to involve community members, they would be worse off or not knowing what was going on in their city. Our actions led to knowledge and compassion (Figure 3).

As we collected the trash, we stored it in a portable storage unit at the school. We began to pull from this storage trailer when we wanted to make projects

this reprogramming of how we view “trash” encouraged us to be more creative and change our perspectives. Students developed empathy for the land as they became more aware of the condition their world was in and the role they played in it. Plus, they were challenged to be innovative in their artmaking.

Besides acting as workshop staff, the students also helped me imagine a larger vision for our future as stewards. We organized “Board Meeting Mondays” where we sat in a circle and discussed our weekly objectives. Class became a place where students could learn how to create artwork out of alternative materials, use their writing skills to extend their voice, apply leadership skills, become more informed about city and county policies, and delve into how their votes could change policies and laws. Every person had a role in making the system work better. This year, which is the third year I have had this class, I asked my students to write a mission and vision statement for our project.

### A Closer Look at Some Artworks

Andrea, one of the seniors, cut a sheet of plywood down to a 3’ x 4’ rectangle and hammered nails into it. She then wrapped yarn along the edges of the nails to create an outline of a turtle. Once the basic shape had been formed, she added discarded netting that swallowed the turtle and entangled it. Her title was *Open Your Eyes—Darkness Approaches*, referencing the dangers of the plastics that pollute our waterways and harm sea creatures, including the turtle depicted in her work. I was pleased to see she was not only thinking about important topics, but also that she was considering what materials best conveyed ideas and called attention to environmental matters (Figure 6).

Iliana, one of the juniors, took a different approach, addressing the irreparable damage that trash has on humans. She gathered cigarette butts from our desert cleanups and put them in a picture frame. The glass was smudged and stained with the tar and ash from the cigarettes. The smell was sickening. The background image included lungs drawn

by the student, and several magazine clippings advertising smoking. She said that the work contrasted cigarette advertisements and their promises with the reality of being boxed in by addiction, health risks, and dependency. Again, materials stimulated her to think about how art allows us to contemplate situations, themes, and feelings (Figure 7).

### Metamorphosis: Trash to Treasure Exhibition

The exhibition Metamorphosis: Trash to Treasure was the culmination of our project. The exhibition was open to the public, included all ages, and entries were not restricted by size. Our objective was to draw attention to the world through the use of recycled or repurposed materials. We had live music, descriptions about each piece on labels, and information boards all throughout the exhibition discussing the project. We also hired models to walk around, fully decked out in makeup and wild hair, to showcase the wearable art that had been accepted into the show (Figure 8).

More than one thousand people attended the exhibition reception. As I looked out over the crowd examining the works, and the artists who were beaming with pride, I could not believe that all of this happened because a group of high school art students and their teacher decided to take action. I remembered that I was concerned that no one would enter our contest—only to be flooded with over 500 submissions. When Chelsea Clinton walked into the gallery and gasped, stating that it was so much more than she had expected it to be, my students and I were immensely proud. Seeing what other artists had made from recycled items, along with the information boards we had created to educate the public made it worth all the hard work. The artists did exactly what we had hoped they would do by turning trash into treasures (Figure 9)!

### Conclusion

Overall, the metamorphosis project has gone well. Although we had ups and downs, we will continue to grow as we move from doing everything as

a class to creating an actual non-profit called Green Hope Project (see [www.GreenHopeProject.org](http://www.GreenHopeProject.org)), which we have just begun.

For me this project demonstrates that environmental consciousness and change must involve young people, not only in my community but across the world. What better way to address our concerns than through the arts? By repurposing materials discarded, the messages we convey in our artworks about the environment carry more weight.

As a teacher, I learned that I am also an activist, environmentalist, counselor, animal rescuer, and artist. Modelling my engagement for my students increased their involvement and can most definitely change our world, leading to a healthier society. The project has already inspired students to vote, major in environmental engineering, apply to art school, and become local activists. We better all get busy though, because there is still a lot more work to do!

### References

- Clinton, C. (2017). *It's your world: Get informed, get inspired & get going!* New York, NY: Puffin Books
- Stevens, F., DiCaprio, L., Packer, J., Ratner, B., Davidoski, T., & Killoran, J. D. (Producers) & Stevens, F. (Director). (2016). *Before the flood [Motion Picture]*. United States: Twentieth Century Fox Home Entertainment, Inc.

using alternative materials and to run our workshops. We also shared these materials with local artists, teachers, and other students in the community. As we moved forward, I began teaching a class called It's Your World. The course was both an art class, focused on using recycled materials, and a way to manage the project (Figure 4). I recruited students to join and we began to study the Great Pacific Garbage Patch, the dangers of micro-plastics, and the rise of fast-fashion. When we learned that plastics never truly break down we began to change our purchasing habits, recycling even more material to use in our artwork. We also discovered that when one-use plastics break down into microplastics, animals mistake them for food, which is harmful because the plastics cannot be digested. In class we discussed Boyan Slat, the teenage founder of the non-profit Ocean Cleanup Project, and his efforts to clean up 50% of the Great Pacific Garbage Patch in the next 5 years. Students were inspired to learn how Slat funds and supports his organization, especially realizing this person was so close to their own age. Lastly, the shocking findings in the documentary

film *Before the Flood* (2016), starring Leonardo DiCaprio, pushed my students and me to aim higher. For example, we were particularly moved by DiCaprio's address to the United Nations in 2014 when he stated:

This is not about just telling people to change their light bulbs or to buy a hybrid car. This disaster has grown beyond the choices that individuals make. This is now about our industries, and governments around the world taking decisive, large-scale action. (Stevens, F., DiCaprio, L., Packer, J., Ratner, B., Davidoski, T., & Killoran, J. D., 2016)

In addition, the students in It's Your World helped me run the art workshops that would include the use of recycled materials. They organized throughout the city, encouraging people of all ages to think about discarded materials in different ways and to create meaningful works of art. The workshops were mostly led by the students, with some teachers and local artists participating, and were so successful that we ended up adding workshops to keep up with the demand. We presented jewelry projects to the Girl Scouts at the Environmental Services

Department. We did a pop-up workshop at the El Paso Museum of Art and showed adults and children how to make magnets and pins out of discarded magazines and glass jewels. We were invited to show community members how to create planters out of burnt out lightbulbs and plastic soda bottles at the El Paso Water Utilities headquarters. We showed art teachers at every grade level how to make fine art from various found objects at the University of Texas at El Paso (Figure 5). We also expanded our own knowledge by working with Helen Dorion and Laura Aragon, two artists from the community, who taught us how to manipulate plastic into jewelry pieces. Other visiting artists also came to my class and spoke about different cultures and how they use readily available materials to create body adornment. These artists opened the students' eyes to what items are being discarded in our current culture and how we can repurpose them. Our visitors also referenced indigenous cultures and showed students how they have influenced contemporary works. Students built confidence as they ran these workshops and learned about using non-traditional materials. Furthermore,

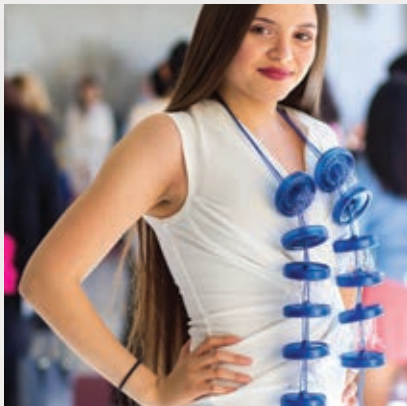
**FIGURE 7.**

*Recycled art by Iliana Sapien, Addiction Author Image.*



**FIGURE 8.**

*Models showcasing the wearable recycled art by Iliana Sapien from the first Metamorphosis: Trash to Treasure exhibition. Author Image.*



**FIGURE 9.**

*Exhibition reception from the first Metamorphosis: Trash to Treasure. Author Image.*

