Painting the town
Students put their mark on city's future

By KEVIN BLANCHARD
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Thirteen Baton Rouge middle school students are painting their vision of the future on a 10-foot-high mural downtown on the levee.

Children need to know they have an impact on their future, said Johnny Tan, chairman of the nonprofit organization Forum 35, which is sponsoring the project.

The mural, Tan said, is a colorful depiction of the students' vision of Baton Rouge in 2020, when they will be in their 30s.

"It's to celebrate our children, who have an opportunity to participate by leaving a living legacy in their own backyard," Tan said.

The mural will be a permanent fixture downtown because of an agreement worked out with the Mayor's Office and the Downtown Development District, Tan said.

"How many times do people have a chance to leave a legacy like that?" Tan said.

Each of the students, participants in the East Baton Rouge Parish gifted and talented program, was first asked the question, "How will Baton Rouge look in the year 2020?"

Project director Geeta Dave, an art teacher at Broadmoor Middle School, said what children think about the future is important.

"They came up with lots of real and unique ideas," Dave said.

The children sketched a monorail system, modern architecture, advanced technology, new sport venues, opera houses, malls, museums, theaters and planetariums, Dave said.

From there, Dave, who has painted a commissioned mural for the Baton Rouge Zoo, put the children's sketches and designs together into a collage.

With grants and support from numerous city organizations, the students work from a model picture, using gallons of paint to bring their vision to life.

The children spend their Saturdays and Sundays painting the 10-foot-high slab of concrete at the site across from the Centroplex.

Rebekah Fontenot is an 11-year-old.

Above: Ammie Foster, 12, left; Kyle Goldich, 13; and Josh Nee, 13; work on a mural as part of a project to paint what they think Baton Rouge will look like in 2020. Left: Foster paints part of a 10-foot-high mural near the river levee.
old Broadmoor Middle School seventh-grader who says art is her “all-time favorite.”

Though she said it is hard to believe she will be 33 in 2020, she knows the importance of her work.

“I’m really proud to be a part of this because I’m doing something good for my community,” she said.

Tan said he hopes the youth involved in the project will have a reunion in 2020.

Rebekah’s mother, Charlene Fontenot, said she has been surprised by how organized the children have been and the amount of dedication they have shown.

Making it to work at 6:30 Saturday mornings and staying until 4 p.m. can be tough, she said.

“But once you get down there and see it, you realize it’s worth it,” she said.