

# Childrens' self-portraits offer a vision of our future

By Henry Belot

The self-portraits of more than 11,000 Canberra school students have brightened the fitters' workshop on the Kingston Foreshore to launch national youth week.

Organised into colour schemes and schools, the self-portraits are an insight into the minds of children across the territory and their visions for the future.

Children and Young People Commissioner Alastair Roy said each child had been asked to explain why adults should listen to them.

While some of the messages paid tribute to acclaimed boy band One Direction, others spoke to concerns about climate change, social media, politics, safety and the arts.

"When we received the portraits and realised how unique they were, we wanted to keep them as portraits rather than digitise them," Mr Roy said. "Children and young people really value having a say when they are asked in an age-appropriate and respectful way."

Mr Roy said most messages could be divided into three sub-categories: those who feel they have a right to be involved, those who feel they know things adults don't and others who are concerned about safety.

The self-portraits were stuck onto hundreds of cardboard boxes and arranged into the shape of a double helix to symbolise the DNA of Canberra.

One student involved was Melody Lehtonen, the 14-year-old school captain at the Kingsford Smith School in Holt.

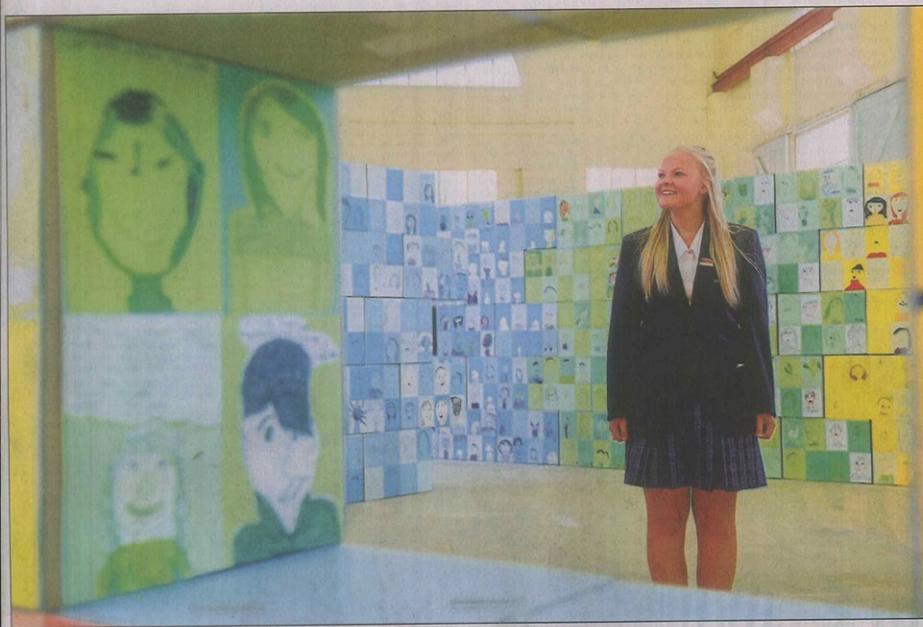
"It is really important that children and young people are heard because not everyone has been a young person in this day and age, and it is very different to how it used to be," she said.

Minister for Children and Young People Mick Gentleman said the messages were an important reminder of the concerns of children and their vision for the future.

"The messages are quite individual as well so you will see some exciting views on how their future should be, how they need to be heard and how they want to see the world in the future," he said.

"We wanted to celebrate children and young people as active members of the Canberra community and to remind adults that children and young people have unique perspectives on a range of topics, and that we can learn a lot by talking with them."

The project, which celebrates the 25th anniversary of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, will be open to the public from Friday until Sunday. Admission is free and face-painting and other activities will be available for all children visiting the installation.



Kingsford Smith Year 10 student Melody Lehtonen admires some of the 11,000 works on display. A selection is shown below. Photos: ROHAN THOMSON

