Cassandra Oliveras-Moreno, alarmed at the rise in racism and anti-Semitism throughout the country, decided a strong counterstatement needed to be made in her community.

The administrator of communications and collaboration at Rutgers University's Mason Gross School of the Arts, she thought a good way to promote diversity and acceptance was to team up with local organizations striving to do just that and display art designed to send the same message in public spaces.

Last year, that idea morphed into the public art installation project Windows of Understanding, which has since expanded significantly. Subtitled “We See Through Hate,” the project has recruited local artists, organizations, and businesses to join together to cultivate compassion and awareness of social justice issues.

Cosponsored by Mason Gross, the New Brunswick Community Arts Council, and the Highland Park Arts Commission, Windows of Understanding kicked off on Jan. 21, Martin Luther King Jr. Day, and will run through Feb. 28. It features artwork in windows of stores and restaurants and events throughout the two towns.

Oliveras-Moreno said works of art draw people in and motivate them to ponder the artist’s message. She spoke to NJJN on Jan. 27 at Ruthie’s Bagel Dish in Highland Park, at the first of three Tables of Understanding events featuring...
tours and discussions of the storefront art displays. Similar events are being held at Rutgers and other spots in New Brunswick, along with movies, speakers, and tours.

The final Highland Park gathering will be held Sunday, Feb. 24, at Sushiana, a kosher Japanese restaurant, where John Marron, arts commission vice chair and cofounder of the Highland Park Arts Collective, will lead a discussion on anti-Semitism and the deeper of meaning of Judaism’s “Etz Chaim,” or Tree of Life.

For the project, participating artists were paired with organizations that are engaged in fighting racism, homophobia, and anti-Semitism; supporting immigrant rights; helping the disabled; and assisting the homeless and hungry. The artwork is in a range of mediums — painting, glasswork, printing, weaving, and sculpture — and each is accompanied by a statement outlining the artist’s inspiration.

Windows of Understanding co-organizer Marc Handelman, a professor of painting and associate chair of art and design at Mason Gross, said about 40 artists, vendors, and organizations are participating, while another dozen are partnering on programs, all of which are free.

Handelman said the university provided a $20,000 community university research grant to fund the program; a survey will measure interactions and partnerships formed between students and community.

He said the Tables of Understanding events at the university have been “inspiring.” The project, he said, “is about community-building, and this vibrant, dynamic form of community art has become the glue for this.”

The discussions and walking tours in New Brunswick have drawn a diverse group of students who “became really inspired to get out and help the community,” said Handelman.
The university’s Allen and Joan Bildner Center for the Study of Jewish Life was selected to participate for the second year. Managing director Karen Small said the center was paired with Maplewood artist Rachel Asarnow; they decided to dedicate a work of art to the victims of the Oct. 27 attack at Tree of Life synagogue in Pittsburgh.

In a phone interview with NJJN, Asarnow said she decided to create a papercut piece featuring the leaves of the “Etz Chaim,” the Tree of Life.

“It was very clear this was a hate crime against the Jewish community,” said Asarnow, who based her project on inscriptions and designs found on old gravestones in Eastern Europe.

“The Tree of Life is such a powerful symbol in Judaism,” she said. In the passage incorporated in her work, in Hebrew and English — “It is a Tree of Life to them that hold fast to it...” — the phrase symbolizes the Torah. Other images she used are circles, often inscribed on gravestones to represent “the continuity of life,” and a broken candle and birds.

A second work sponsored by Bildner, on display at the American Hungarian Foundation, was created by Amee Pollack, a Highland Park resident and undergraduate program adviser at Mason Gross, who designed a desk surrounded by books to convey the concept “The essence of being Jewish is education.”

For her other artwork — on display at the Costa Chica Restaurant in New Brunswick — Pollack worked with the Brady Campaign to Prevent Gun Violence. She painted pillars of justice with memorial stones dedicated to the victims of gun violence, drawing inspiration, she said, from the Jewish practice of placing stones on the graves of loved ones.

Sarah Grunstein, a Rutgers graduate who double-majored in Jewish studies and art and is now an art teacher at Highland Park High School, brought the director of Raising Hands Tutoring, which provides free services to low-income students with reading disabilities, to speak to her students. The students then designed and fashioned ceramic hands and books spotlighting the struggles of youngsters who suffer from reading difficulties. Their artwork is on display at Over the Moon Toys in Highland Park.

The experience was “very eye-opening” to her students, Grunstein said — as they learned that “one in five people are affected by reading disabilities” — and “felt a real kindred spirit.”

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