

"The last letter he sent me said he almost cried because he missed us."

Alexus Thurmond, Gardner Middle School



GREG DeRUITER/Lansing State Journal

Art project: Tyshaun White poses for a photo Tuesday by Dylan Rogers for a show of NorthWest Initiative artwork. The after-school program is for students with parents or siblings in prison.

Program uses art as an outlet for kids with relatives in prison

pilot program helps keep families close

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As 15-year-old Alexis Thurmond posed for a photo in the stairwell of Gardner Middle School, she thought about whether she might want to send the picture to her mother's boyfriend, who's like a father to her, she said.

Since he went to prison several months ago, Alexis has regularly sent him letters and photos of herself, her mother and siblings.

"I just tell him everything so he will know that we're doing good," the eighth-grader said. "The last letter he sent me said he almost cried because he missed us."

She's one of 12 students from the Lansing school who wrapped up a program Tuesday through which they took photos, wrote poems and letters and created other artwork that they sent to incarcerated relatives.

The kids met after school once a week for the free pilot program that started in March. The NorthWest Initiative, a nonprofit dedicated to strengthening Lan-



Making progress: Jeana-Dee Allen shows artwork made by students in a NorthWest Initiative after-school program for students enrolled with parents or siblings in prison. Allen is NorthWest Initiative's community assistant.

| ART SHOW

► The students' artwork will be displayed 6-9 p.m. July 30 at Creole Gallery, 1218 Turner St., in Lansing's Old Town.

sing neighborhoods, organized the program.

"The whole point is to get communication flowing," said Jeana-Dee Allen, NorthWest Initiative community building assistant.

For some of the kids, the pro-

gram marked the first time they'd contacted their relatives, while others communicate with them more frequently, she said.

The family members' prison terms range from a couple of years to life in prison, and their convictions range from breaking and entering to homicide, Allen said. Most of the relatives are incarcerated in Michigan, but some are as far away

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as Kentucky.

"I saw a lot of the anger and sadness that went with not having that person in their life," said Irene Meyer, Gardner's student intervention specialist. "This gives the kids a place where they can talk about it because

everyone here is in the same situation. It doesn't have to be a secret here. It's hard on a kid to have to keep a secret like that."

The program used a \$650 Mayor's Neighborhood Advisory Board Grant, as well as part of a \$1,580 grant NorthWest received from the Capital

Region Community Foundation, Allen said. The grant money paid for items such as digital cameras, photo prints and snacks, Meyer said.

Allen said she is working to expand the program to other Lansing schools. The program will return to Gardner in the fall.