



Port Townsend High School junior Riley Johnson and senior Sam Boatman create a wearable art headpiece resembling a rare species of porpoise known as the vaquita.

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The art classroom at Port Townsend High School was abuzz with activity Jan. 15, as students were reminded — much to the surprise of some of them — that their wearable art projects were due in class that Wednesday.

Freshmen Ephraim Lewis and Rell Lennox started with an ensemble whose design was pan-Asian in its cultural flavor, with samurai-inspired armor and a conical hat that had been ornamented with dead flowers, before streamers were attached to the hat to resemble a jellyfish and its tentacles.

This was one of many nods to this year's theme of climate disruption, particularly in the Puget Sound region, that freshmen Bella Bearman and Sophia Huber worked with sophomore Eleanor Kleiner to evoke.

"It's sort of the Puget Sound as Maleficent," Kleiner said, as she helped Huber fashion the hoops of the outfit's ballroom gown frame, all while Bearman painted the cardboard crown to resemble a mix of living and dying coral.

As befitting an "ocean widow," Bearman noted that she'd originally tried to use actual pieces of coral in the crown, and asserted that pollution could kill off coral reefs as a whole if humanity doesn't act to save them in time, which she sees as wreaking both environmental catastrophe and hampering quality of life

by depressing tourist travel to exotic reefs.

Freshman Danielle Lukin modeled a headpiece that's comically fashioned to resemble a crab, while her peers worked to join an accompanying dress meant to resemble seaweed, but when asked what environmental concern she was hoping to highlight, she laughed and admitted she could have done a touch more research.

Junior Riley Johnson and senior Sam Boatman could probably teach a number of adults a thing or two with the amount of research they did, which inspired them to create a headpiece resembling a rare species of porpoise.

"The vaquita is one of the most endangered marine mammals," Johnson said. "There are only about 10 left in the world."

Johnson pointed to fishermen's gill nets as a leading culprit in the vaquita's extinction, which is why the shirt of their outfit resembles fishing nets.

PTHS art teacher Michele Soderstrom explained that about 75 students have worked in teams to produce between 30 and 40 "wearable art" outfits, while Margie McDonald, the PT Artscape teacher and youth coordinator for the Port Townsend Wearable Art Show, credited the students for managing to go from preliminary sketches to final creations within two weeks.

Soderstrom noted that the underlying maritime theme of the wearable art came from making it a place-based project, as part of PTHS' remit as a maritime and place-based learning school.

"It's important that our students be able to express themselves artistically," Soderstrom said. "And learning about the climate disruption of the Salish Sea is important because it's their world."

McDonald explained that Jan. 25 marks the fourth year of the Student Wearable Art Show, which was spun off from the PT Wearable Art Show in May at McCurdy Pavilion.

While she estimated the May show's audience participation numbers at roughly 1,200, she figured the student spinoff gets about 66, with five to 10 student wearable art pieces in the show, of which two or three go on to take part in the May show.

She also noted that students have the option not to be involved, since the Jan. 25 student show at 2 p.m. and 3 p.m. at the Key City Public Theatre is technically after-school.

"We do have six kids coming from Quilcene, whom we work with once a week down there," McDonald said.

McDonald and Soderstrom both praised the students for their self-directed motivation, while Soderstrom lauded McDonald's collection of recycled materials, which go right back into each year's wearable art pieces.