

## Student artwork selected for calendar

By Scott Stewart

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Twelve students from Bloomer Elementary School will have artwork featured in a calendar created for the school by NeighborWorks.

Winners of an art contest held earlier this week were announced Friday during an assembly, one of several events across the metropolitan area organized to raise awareness of the need for affordable housing.

Students at Bloomer were asked to show what home is to them with their art contest submissions. They drew pictures and older students also wrote a short response to the prompt.

Barbara Johnson, the director of community building and engagement for NeighborWorks, said during the assembly that answers included love, safety, memories and shelter, along with many other responses.

“Home means something different to everyone but home matters to everyone,” she said. “That’s what this contest is about.”

Johnson told the students they will receive calendars featuring student artwork sometime in May that will run through April 2016.

“This is really exciting,” Principal Casey Moran said before beginning to announce the winners.

The students selected were Elijah McElroy, Phoenix Knutson, Blayze Swanson, Bryent Pauley, Dashawn Allison, Megan Harris Gibbs, Jazman Martinez, Chole Noelle Jackson, Eddi Morales, Peyton Grenoble, Vanessa Perez Valdez and Andrea Camarillo Arroyo.

When he heard his name called, 7-year-old Elijah said he had no idea it was coming.

“I was pretty shocked,” he said.

Phoenix, a third-grader, was also not expecting to hear her name.



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Students, school administrators, art judges and NeighborWorks representatives pose for a photo with the winning art contest submissions illustrating what home meant to the students at Bloomer Elementary School on Friday. The 12 winning submissions will be featured on a school calendar created by NeighborWorks.

“I was really surprised because I never really win anything,” she said.

Both students, along with their schoolmates who all posed for photos together afterwards, referred to several different themes when asked to describe what they felt home means.

“My home is where my mom can take care of me,” Elijah said.

“Home means everything to me,” Phoenix added.

First-grader Blayze summed the meaning of home up: “It means family.”

That was the sort of insight that Joe Kueper, president of NeighborWorks Home Solutions, was hoping to receive from the students of Bloomer. The nonprofit is working on reaching out into communities to receive feedback.

“We go out into the neighborhood and talk to the folks and find out what their needs are,” Kueper said.

When building a neighborhood, it’s better to look bottom-up at needs, asking people instead of viewing it as a system. The Bloomer event helped raise awareness, Kueper said, but the students also provided valuable feedback.

“They paint us a picture, literally, of what a good home environment is,” he said. “We started with the children because they don’t lie – they tell you what they like and don’t like.”

Learning what people want helps to avoid mistakes, he said. For example, he said his organization once put a computer room into an apartment building that no one ended up using because residents had their own devices. Instead, they should have added Wi-Fi.

“It is all trying to make a better neighborhood,” Kueper said.

Friday’s event was part of the Home Matters initiative, a national push to ensure every American lives in a safe, nurturing environment with access to education, health care, public spaces and community services.

Students from the University of Nebraska at Omaha Public Relations Student Society of America chapter volunteered to organize the event in collaboration with NeighborWorks Home Solutions.

More information on the Home Matters initiative can be found at [homemattersamerica.com](http://homemattersamerica.com), while more on NeighborWorks can be found at [neighborworkshomesolutions.org](http://neighborworkshomesolutions.org). NeighborWorks’ new Facebook page is also featuring Bloomer and Iowa Western Community College student responses to what home means to them.