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UI art students help with piano project

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University of Iowa seniors Kallie Holdt, from left, Olivia Houck and Chris Merkle volunteer to paint a piano, as part of the Downtown Piano Project, on Thursday at the UI Studio Arts Building. / Press-Citizen / Benjamin Roberts

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When pianists sit down to play on one of Iowa City's public pianos, they and their audience now will have something extra to look at.

University of Iowa art students are painting two pianos that will be added to the Downtown Piano Project in the next week or two.

"It's a unique opportunity to have our art publicly displayed on the piano," said Olivia Houck, 22, a UI senior. "I think it's a good way of showing the importance of art besides just visiting an art museum."

UI seniors Houck, Kallie Holt, 22, and Chris Merkle, 26, are spending the next couple days painting the first of the two pianos at

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the Studio Arts Building. The plan is to overlay the piano with takes on their favorite famous paintings.

Merkle stroked a shape from a Mayan mural with a print of the original in a book on his lap. The plan is to put the two painted pianos downtown two weekends from now.

"If this goes well, we are hoping to (do) more pianos and continue the project," Holt said.

The idea for the student's involvement rose out of the Art Students Ambassadors group, which identifies areas of the art school to improve.

Student Lizzie Ginsberg thought the art school needed more community collaboration, said Lynne Lanning, an undergraduate adviser in the school.

One piano will be placed in front of M.C. Ginsberg, which is owned by Lizzie Ginsberg's father, Mark Ginsberg. The second location hasn't been decided.

Downtown developer Marc Moen, who helped start the Piano Project last year with a piano outside his Plaza Tower's building, said the plan is to have five or six pianos downtown this year.

"I think it is great. Last year, we did it to see if it would work, and it did," Moen said. "The whole point of it is to cause discussion, ... and I think the painting adds to that."

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