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IMAGES OF INTOLERANCE OPEN STUDENTS' EYES

BYRON CENTER -- An exhibit at Byron Center High School's Van Singel Fine Arts Center is hard to look at -- but it carries an important message. "Reclaiming Community: Using Images of Intolerance to Teach Tolerance" consists of racist images and artifacts, many of them used in advertising.

Organizers said people who see the exhibit will need a strong stomach to look at the items, some obtained from David Pilgrim, curator of the Jim Crow Museum at Ferris State University.

"A lot of students are quite shocked," said social studies teacher Michael Barnes.

Barnes said seeing the exhibit reminded him of a visit to the Holocaust Museum in Washington D.C.

He said the worst image in the Van Singel exhibit, for him, showed a black boy being eaten by an alligator.

He said some of the items are still being fabricated today.

For example, "chop suey" glasses are part of the Halloween costume industry, and a Mexican "bandit" doll was obtained from a novelty Web site, he said.

The display case that Barnes stocked also includes a Washington Redskins beer mug and a Cleveland Indians hat.

The display is part of an interdisciplinary unit taught by Barnes, graphic arts instructor Greg Reinstein and teacher Ken Whitcomb.

Students worked on altering some images to take out the racist images. They also were invited to post reactions on Barnes' historical Web site to specific images or artifacts.

"Seeing this makes me want to cry," reads one posting from Beth Plugger and Shan VanEngen about the boy being eaten by an alligator, which comes from an old Florida postcard.

The exhibit officially ended Friday, but Barnes said it will probably stay up until school resumes after holiday break.