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Johnson Brings International Research Project to Minnesota State Fair

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UNIVERSITY OF MINNESOTA MORRIS

Johnson Brings International Research Project to Minnesota State Fair

Jacquie Johnson, chancellor emerita, served as the fifth chancellor at UMN Morris from 2006–17, a job she loved, but that left little time to conduct research. When she retired, she served as a scholar-in-residence for a semester at the University of Minnesota’s Institute for Advanced Studies and returned to an international research project she and a colleague initiated in 1990.

The project, called the ImagineNation Art Project, involved children in both Poland and the United States in grades 4, 5 and 6, who were asked to use their artistic talent to illustrate their response to two different statements: This is America; and, This is Poland. The work began when Johnson’s colleague, Professor Anna Karwinska of the Krakow University of Economics in Krakow, Poland, was preparing to travel for a year-long academic appointment in the United States, bringing her eleven-year-old son with her. She wondered how her son and his classmates imagined this country that they had never visited, invited them to draw, and brought their illustrations along with her. Additional pictures were gathered in the United States at the start of the project and the two then returned to the research in 2019, gathering more drawings a generation later.

Johnson and Karwinska currently are in the process of analyzing the 600 images collected in these two periods. They plan to publish their research, which Johnson describes as “more exploratory and thought-provoking than purely scientific in nature.” She notes that their open-ended approach has provided a window into kids’ imagination and insight.

“One of my favorite pieces, from a child in Poland, includes a giant cheeseburger, with the McDonald’s golden arches on the side and the American flag planted in the middle of the burger.” Another memorable picture for her is an incomplete full-page version of the American flag rippling in the breeze, drawn by a recent immigrant to this country from Central America. “I think that speaks to the hope and the idea of America and the promise of the American dream.”

Johnson was struck by how frequently the children, both in the United States and in Poland, included American icons such as the Statue of Liberty and the American flag. When trying to provide a collective review of the artwork, Johnson said it has visual eloquence that “gives us pause as adults.”

The research is non-partisan, children participated with parental permission, and the only information gathered about each child who participated was their age and gender.

The images gathered to date have been digitized and Johnson still has the original artwork from both the 1990 and 2019 projects. After the research has been published, Johnson intends to create an exhibit of the artwork.

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For more information, please contact Jacqueline Johnson, chancellor emerita, directly at jrjohnso@morris.umn.edu.