

DEVIL'S FUNHOUSE

Entertainment

ART OR VANDALISM?

KAYLA MCCARTHY/HUB GRAPHIC

By **ALANA DE HINOJOSA**
Editor-in-Chief

“Here, let me show you,” a DHS male student says as he rummages through his backpack for a mystery item. A faint smirk comes to his face as he retrieves a thick black paint pen, followed by a crumpled piece of paper. Effortlessly, he begins drawing out the word “Egg” in a bubble-like font. “That’s what it looks like. That’s my tag name. You’ve probably seen it around.” He pauses. “You can call me Egg.”

Egg is a street bomber, a graffiti artist, who is part of a graffiti crew made-up of two DHS students. The crew calls themselves RSK, the “real seasoned kings.”

“We’re not that hardcore, we’re just random kids who dig graffiti,” Egg said.

Almost every other week the crew gets together for moonlit graffiti excursions, where they travel around Davis as “night ninjas” looking for hard-to-reach spots to tag with not only “RSK,” but their individual graffiti names. In addition to their nightly tags, the boys said they tag by themselves every single day. Their tags can be found on countless electrical boxes in North Davis, the inside of a West Davis tunnel and scattered around Unitrans bus stations.

“You’re always going for the biggest and baddest spot...otherwise it’s bummer,” another RSK member, who goes by Wig, said. “But really we’re just out there for the adrenaline rush, and so we can see our names everywhere. Graffiti artists are really egotistical people.”

Egg agreed with Wig, explaining “there is definitely a high with it that keeps you going.”

“You get stoked being out there and psyched when you see your name out there. It’s like you’re creating a map of

all the places you’ve been,” he said.

Community response

RSK, along with other local graffiti artists, contribute to the 30 to 50 weekly reported graffiti incidents in Davis, according to Davis graffiti overseer Lisa Buckman. This does not include tags on private property, something Buckman said would increase the number of Davis tags substantially.

“We have an ongoing problem in Davis [with graffiti]. It has more than doubled since last year,” she said.

Currently Davis has nine volunteers who go around Davis neighborhoods removing reported graffiti. In this fiscal year alone, the city has spent more than \$100,000 removing and cleaning graffiti.

Just this past January, the Davis Art Center fell victim to the tags of a local graffiti artist by the name of Ape. Ape, notorious with RSK for continually painting over its tags, painted his name along the F Street wall of the center.

“You just feel used. You haven’t chosen the art and it means that you’re going to have to do a lot of work cleaning up because of someone you don’t know,” Davis Art Center director Erie Vitiello said. Vitiello was encouraged by Buckman to paint over the graffiti as quickly as possible.

“A quick response on clean up really helps discourage taggers,” Buckman said.

Since the graffiti incident in January, the Davis Art Center has painted over another two Ape tags. Both Wig and Egg agreed that Davis officials have been especially swift with clean up.

“Every single one of my tags and [graffiti] pieces get buffed. It’s sad; but it also makes you want to go back out and do it again. It’s a repeating process,” Wig said.

Egg called this aspect of graffiti a “part of the game.”

“You’re competing with buffers to see if you can do more tags than they can handle; you’re competing with other local people over the number of tags you can put out there; and you’re competing over where you tag,” he said.

Davis police officer Jesse Dacandy, however, called graffiti a “risky game to play.” He hinted that the Davis Police Department has undercover tactics for busting graffiti artists, but avoided making any concrete statements, chuckling to himself and saying, “I can’t give away that kind of information.” What Dacandy was candid about, however, was how easily felony charges could be easily executed.

Graffiti artists can be charged with a misdemeanor if tagged surface damages are under \$400. However, if damages exceed \$400, a felony charge is put into place.

“Some tags cannot be cleaned adequately, depending on the surface. Four hundred dollars can stack up really quick,” Dacandy said. Felony charges can mean a hefty fine and at least one year in prison.

Artistic expression or crime?

“There’s no way that graffiti is worth the risks. If I thought we were gonna get caught, I would probably quit,” Egg said.

But, according to Wig, “you do it anyways.”

“You do it because somebody needs to do it,” Wig said as he paused to dot his “I” in his doodled mock-tag. “Streets are boring. We put color into them; make them interesting. We put life into them. There’s art to it.”

The debate over whether graffiti is art or vandalism has never fully come to a conclusion. Even those who have had their property defaced, like Vitiello, find themselves arguing both sides.

“Graffiti has a slightly

different spirit behind it. We have to recognize that. It’s not destroying something, but it is vandalism. Yet, it’s also a statement against normality, and art does that very often,” Vitiello said.

In the new book, “Graffiti Lives: Beyond the Tag in New York’s Urban Underground” by sociologist Gregory J. Synder, Synder called graffiti a “democratic art form that reveals the American Dream.” However, he went on to note that graffiti has been associated with crime ever since social scientists George L. Kelling and James Q. Wilson introduced their “broken windows theory,” which states that low-level crimes, if not addressed, create an atmosphere favorable to serious and violent crimes.

“I’m not trying to make an argument that graffiti is art and not vandalism,” professor Snyder said in a New York Times interview. “I hope I’ve made it clear that it’s both.”

DHS art teacher Ted Fontaine, however, said he wouldn’t call graffiti a form of art.

“I personally don’t view it as art. But, I also think it’s not an either/or thing; it’s a ‘beauty is in the eye of the beholder’ kind of thing,” he said.

Wig credits graffiti’s young life as the reason for society’s hesitance towards considering graffiti as a form of art. American graffiti first exploded onto the walls and streets of the U.S. in the early 1970s.

“People don’t accept things right away. It takes time for people to recognize art, and graffiti hasn’t been around that long,” he said.

Nevertheless, Wig seems to be content with the world’s “on the fence” attitude towards graffiti.

“To me, graffiti is both, and that’s the beauty of it,” he said as he reached into his backpack for a mystery item. The sound of a rattling can could faintly be made out.



ANONYMOUS SOURCE/COURTESY PHOTO

Above: The graffiti crew RSK leaves their tag around Davis. The group is made up of two DHS students who find their tagging to be a form of art.

Do you consider graffiti art or vandalism?



“Art, because it is an expression of what the artist is trying to say.”
—Selene Clay, senior



“Vandalism, because it is a disruption to other people’s property.”
—Sam Chastain, sophomore



“I did an entire presentation on graffiti in art history last year and therefore it is art.”
—Mark Ward, senior



“The way it is used is vandalism because usually it’s profanity.”
—Kimberly Robertson, junior

KELSEY EWING/HUB PHOTOS