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Refugee Crisis, Belonging in a New Culture Focus of Exhibit

CEDARVILLE, OHIO -- On Saturday, February 16, Annie Lee-Zimerle and Zac Benson, assistant professors of studio art at Cedarville University, will open their show at the Springfield Museum of Art, along with Lee-Zimerle's husband, Brian Zimerle. This exhibit focused on the concept of shelter and belonging.

Lee-Zimerle is collaborating with her husband on a piece about her experiences as an artist, mother, wife, teacher, woman, minority and Christian. Zimerle works in 3D art with ceramics and sculpture while Lee-Zimerle works in mainly 2D art with drawing and painting. They are combining their skills for a collaborative piece where Zimerle will create ceramic tiles and Lee-Zimerle will paint images on them to reflect her life story.

"This project is all about adapting and getting into a new space," said Lee-Zimerle. "Neither my husband or I have done a project like this before, so this is a new process that reflects the diverse experiences in my life that were very new for me."

Lee-Zimerle's work shows her experiences with a different background and culture from her caucasian husband, yet she demonstrates the melting pot that America has become and how it has become her home. This theme matches the theme of 'shelter' of another exhibit that will also be shown at the museum and Benson's work about the Syrian refugee crisis.

"These art pieces really relate to the idea of shelter in that these refugees don't have shelter," said Benson. "My art is my way of thinking through social issues and using my faith to navigate them. Even though it may be an old saying, I find myself asking: What would Jesus do?"

Benson will be showing two art installation pieces at the museum, which will use two galleries. One piece is composed of strands of orange thread hanging an inch apart from the ceiling to a few feet from the floor. The entire gallery will be filled wall-to-wall with these threads so viewers can walk through them and touch them. Each strand represents the life of a refugee who died while traveling to safety. Currently, Benson says, the count is more than 34,000.

In the center of the room, Benson will suspend the structure of a small boat made from heating and ventilation ductwork. The dingy will contain speakers projecting sounds of waves that will reverberate through the ducts, causing a distorted sound of water.

Benson chose orange thread to represent the orange life vests that are worn by some trying to cross the Mediterranean. He is using about 69,000 yards of thread hung from 100 panels that will cover the ceiling of the gallery. According to Benson, this is his largest art installation project to date.

Benson's second piece is a copy of an image that he found while researching the refugee crisis, a small blue pop tent walled inside a tall chain link fence. On the tent, Benson has spray painted the same letters in Arabic that appear in the image. When translated, the message says, "If you fear God, help us."

"It is common for refugees to spray paint their tents as a way to get messages out through the media," said Benson. "I received the message here in Cedarville, Ohio, and I will continue to share it."

Both Benson and Lee-Zimerle will install their artwork in early January before their opening in February. The exhibit will run through June 2019.

Located in southwest Ohio, Cedarville University is an accredited, Christ-centered, Baptist institution with an enrollment of 4,193 undergraduate, graduate and online students in more than 150 areas of study. Founded in 1887, Cedarville is recognized nationally for its authentic Christian community, rigorous academic programs, strong graduation and retention rates, accredited professional and health science offerings and leading student satisfaction ratings. For more information about the University, visit www.cedarville.edu.