Creativity takes courage,” said French painter Henri Matisse and that is exactly what five students and O’Kane Gallery Director Mark Cervenka needed when participating in the local public art project, Open the Door.

This ground-breaking project was organized by the Texan-French Alliance for the Arts (TFAA) and the Paris art collective 9eme Concept. It seeks to break down social barriers and cultural stereotypes and foster intercultural understanding through art. Twelve professional artists, six Texan and six French, were selected to paint one side of commissioned doors into works of art that are now part of a citywide public art exhibition. Along with these 12 professionals, about 20 teams of students, professors and professionals from area educational and arts institutions also were chosen to participate.

“It is pretty amazing and a great testament to our students that four UHD proposals were selected,” Cervenka said. “It’s phenomenal exposure and a life-changing experience for the students to go
through the entire commission process from submitting a proposal to executing the design.”

The four selected proposals were submitted by Cervenka with student Jose Gonzalez; Karla Morales; Bereniz Martinez; and Quentin Pace and Michael Martin. The Cervenka-Gonzalez team and Morales each painted the second side of a door belonging to one of the 12 professional artists. The Pace-Martin team and Martinez collaborated with students from other universities on the painting of their doors.

“I was so excited to work on this project,” Gonzalez said. “It was nerve-wracking at first, but a really great experience.”

The Cervenka-Gonzalez proposal centered on the idea of exploration, the human experience and passages leading into more passages. It features several rooms separated by archways and doors and shows two figures at different depths.

“It is always important when working on a commission to be respectful of the theme, but also to be respectful of one’s own vision. It’s really about meshing those two elements together,” Cervenka mused. “That is something our students learned during this experience, as they were working as professional artists rather than students.”

TFAA Executive Director Karine Parker-Lemoyne stated that the decision to include educational institutions and student artists was an exciting one. “We wanted to open doors to the future generations of artists and to the ones who are supporting them in their development, the professors,” she said. “We had to find a way to engage the community and the public as well.”

Other institutions that participated in the project included The Art League, Lone Star College, the Glassell School of Art and the Awty International School.

The doors were completed on March 5 and installed in public places selected for their diverse cultural neighborhoods and local significance, including the Houston Public Library, French Consul General residence, Emancipation Park, Hermann Park and UHD’s Willow Street Pump Station.

“Open the Door is designed as a ‘cultural trail,’ leading the public from one location to another through a creative narrative,” Parker-Lemoyne said. “This allows the public to discover Houston through the artworks, which are placed in ways that reflect the surrounding community.”

Through their art, UHD students performed a community service, exposing “Houston’s vibrant cultural scene, quality of life, and its wonderful diversity to the world,” according to the project mission statement. Already, other major cities around the world are vying for the opportunity to bring this project to their regions.