

Hands on, from the heart

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From the moment the sun rises, the corner of NW 6th Avenue and Burnside becomes a fast-paced and bustling part of Portland. Cars, trains, and buses tear by en route on the main artery that is Burnside. Pedestrians shuffle through the summer heat, all passing through the neighborhood to their destinations. Though the intersection seems to embody the high-speed and impersonal nature of modern urban living, the heart of a community still beats within Old Town behind the sturdy red doors of the Downtown Chapel. There, volunteers, guests and staff are hard at work on a mural based on the theme of community living in the Old Town neighborhood. On Sept. 1, the iconic red doors will fly open for a First Thursday exhibit of the rich and varied, though sometimes troubled, face of this community.

"For so long," chapel guest Albert Tuinzing said. "The streets were breaking my heart for the homeless. I'd like to be able to help."

Though the art on each of the mural's 35 rectangular and triangular panel pieces is as varied as the individuals who painted them, many of the artists are driven by a motivation similar to Tuinzing's. The mural functions as a way for guests and volunteers to give back to the community that has supported them in times of need. It will raise awareness of the hardships endured by many people who live in the Old Town neighborhood, as well as highlight the values and strengths of the community fostered in the chapel.

"The project is a way to demolish stereotypes," said Gabriel Romero, coordinator of the mural project. "It is a way for the artists to show that they are creative, talented and resourceful people." Romero himself was resourceful in his effort to secure the "Friends of Old Town" grant from Neighbors West-Northwest in order to fund

the project, as well as in his work to involve a range of Old Town community members, including Larry Kangas, a muralist and mural coordinator at the chapel, who contributed materials.

The mural, though ambitious in scale and focused in its message, is only one part of the umbrella arts program at The Downtown Chapel. For the second year in a row, the chapel art program, led by pastoral associate Andrew Nothe, offers a summer-long curriculum of weeklong classes. A staff of 10 volunteers provides a structured and safe environment for artists to immerse themselves in working with various mediums.

The 35 panels, designed by volunteer Jeannie Nothe, will be sewn onto a single backing, then treated with transparent weatherproof paint, and on Thursday, Sept. 1, the mural will hang on the outer east wall of the chapel. Until then, the panels, both works in progress and finished pieces, decorate the walls and tables on the second floor of the chapel.

The workspace is next to the kitchen, where the smell of food and coffee lends a comforting and homey feeling to the large room. The vibrant handprints of some of the volunteers wave on the pastel field of one of the panels, welcoming all who enter the workroom. Many of the panels depict a similar direct representation of community and togetherness, while other panels reflect the specific character of the Old Town community. Portland's landmark bridges as well as its public gardens and the Chinatown gates are popular images, though there are also images among those less welcoming landmarks that show aspects of the Old Town community that are often overlooked. A man with a bedroll lies under a tree in one of the panels. Steve Mason, a poet and

volunteer at the chapel, wrote the short poem, "Daisy and Our Dawn," about a cat, Daisy, who shares his tent. These valuable depictions of Old Town life will get their rightful places in the patchwork mural, helping to raise awareness of the community that many people, in their hurried commute, may not see.

During one afternoon workshop, it was apparent that coffee is an overall outstanding theme of both the chapel and its guests. Nadja and her daughter Inina, while arched over a colorful garden of heart-shaped flowers, compared the group's work to drinking coffee in the morning; a social action. Rows of coffee cups appear in one of the panels painted by volunteer Rosemary Werring, or "Granny" to regulars at The Red Doors. Her work symbolizes the warmth and hospitality always readily available at The Downtown Chapel.

The guests and volunteers spread out around a few tables, hovering over their panels, paints and coffee. A light and constant conversation reverberates throughout the room as artists banter, tell stories, and consult each other on aesthetic details. They look and sound like a group of friends, coworkers, or simply, a community.

Adam Hinkle, a volunteer, had just finished his painting of the Steel Bridge silhouetted against an open blue sky and complemented by a foreground of evergreen

trees.

Hinkle painted the Steel Bridge because he has a strong interest in bridges and history. Leafing through a library book dedicated to the history of Oregon bridges Hinkle began listing extensive facts about the bridges in Portland; what style and architecture, how they operated, and the various positive and negative qualities they held as compared with each other. Not only had Hinkle's mural work led to the exploration of a new topic, he says that "it keeps my mind off of other things." Hinkle lives at the Clark Center and soon will be six months sober after a struggle with drugs and alcohol that led to homelessness.

Today the mural is a focal point within a small community. Come Sept. 1, the mural will function as a tool to raise awareness of the realities of the homeless experience in Old Town as well as the community-building efforts of The Downtown Chapel. The project will also work to give the participants skills they need to continue to succeed. As Hinkle says, "it's part of making a commitment, following through with it, and being part of a community."

This story is part of a collaboration between Street Roots and Portland State University's Capstone Class: Street Roots Exploring Issues of Homelessness.



PHOTOS BY MARCIA ROCHNA

At right, Albert Tuinzing works on the finishing touches of his colorful painting while Beryl McNair starts her first sketch. Above, Richard Maldonado has been a participant in many of the chapel's art programs but said that the mural project is the first time he has really gotten into his art.

