

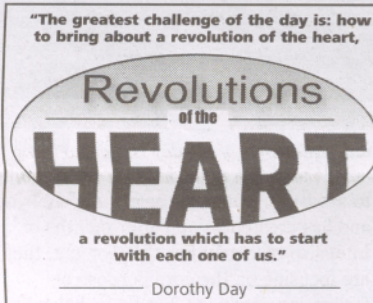
# Walls of beauty, walls of healing

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Heysus is a graphic artist on the rise in Portland, a soft-spoken, thoughtful young man with a story to tell. In 2007, while at Lane Middle School, he helped paint a mural with Rodolfo "Rudy" Serna, a local artist who befriended him.

Over time, a teacher-student relationship emerged and Heysus began to see his mentor as a role model, one who stuck with him during his time of changing high schools and the resultant temporary homelessness.

Although Heysus was unaware at the time, Rudy was laying the groundwork for Heysus' future artistic development. Now 21, Heysus (his professional name) has gained recognition for his cartoon and screen-printing arts, and he mounted his own art show on March 30 at Roseland



Theater in Portland.

Rudy Serna, a 41-year-old Mexican-American, has dedicated his life to traumatized youths, those who have been scarred by abuse, addictions, dislocation and gangs. Strong threads of his own childhood poverty, alienation and chaos are woven into Rudy's work of healing through community building and the arts. With snapping black eyes, a long ponytail and paint-splattered clothes, Rudy is a powerful figure who naturally attracts kids outside the mainstream culture. More than 20 of his murals grace the interiors and exteriors of public schools, community sites and public buildings in Portland, along with two schools in Vancouver, Wash.

I met with Heysus in Lents at the Wattles Boys & Girls Club mural that he helped create. Completed in late 2015 as a collaboration that included four nonprofit groups and 65 young artist partners, the mural stretches 90 by 25 feet. This bold painting is typical of Rudy's style: traditional indigenous and spiritual symbols mix with everyday images. Primary colors are applied using the impressionistic techniques of stippling, or small dots, and hatch marks. This particular mural depicts the Four Directions, the indigenous philosophical

teaching that place and color may divide us, but we are all related and live within the same circle.

In the top portion, animals, butterflies, buildings and people represent life as the kids see it. The four ancestral spirit figures of North, South, East and West anchor the picture, each 15 feet high, supporting with outstretched arms the world above them. The piece is so large, its colors so saturated that it can be glimpsed from Interstate 205 South on the west side of Foster Road. Like all of Rudy's murals, this one is a mirror of the community; culturally diverse kids worked together to select the images, including fierce animals, Pacific Northwest scenery, bridges, people, flowers, and symbols of their culture and Portland.

"My cultural background gives the youth confidence," he said. "My being a brown person gets the kids to tell me stories about their lives, or what happens at home, or a boy in pain because his brother was deported."

Rudy's goal is to build a trusting relationship with at-risk kids, maybe the first one in their life.

But first Rudy has to find them, and he does so through social media, community agencies, nonprofit groups, public schools, housing meetings and professional trainings.

Mural making is a process. Rudy begins by submitting a proposal for a project to a community partner. Then he secures funding, and meets with the youths at their school gym or community center. He sings a traditional Lakota song to thank the youths for joining him, and then tells a story about totems or spirit helpers, emphasizing humility and sacrifice.

While designing and painting the mural, Rudy carves out a space for marginalized youngsters, where conversations about life and pain are safe and mutual trust begins. One reason for his success is constant role modeling: If he can do it, they can too. Through the medium of painting, teens can risk confiding disturbing or shocking things, some of them unbelievable, he said. Some older boys arrived in Portland after a harrowing trip from Central America and painted their own faces into a grim picture of boys at a crossroads. Rarely do kids ever paint self-portraits, he said.

Rudy said a grisly, mean-looking bear may stand in for a memory or thought that the youth needs to express. On the mural inside Northeast Portland's Rigler School, a menacing black and deep purple panther is poised to pounce on the viewer. This is the school's mascot, but for the mural, the



PHOTO BY JOE GLODE

Rudy Serna, 41, teaches kids the basics of creating murals, as well as nurturing relationships. His mural at Wattles Boys & Girls Club stretches 90 by 25 feet and mixes traditional indigenous and spiritual symbols — such as the four ancestral spirit figures of North, South, East and West — with earthly images — such as animals, butterflies and buildings.

STREET ROOTS PHOTO



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RUDY SERNA

kids wanted more: a strong and powerful animal, reflecting how they felt.

Over the weeks of creating a mural, in addition to nurturing relationships, he teaches the kids the basics of building a scaffold, mixing colors and handling various brushes. Their completed mural culminates with a festive unveiling for the entire community. Ultimately, kids develop an intense pride of joint ownership; it's *their* mural. Rudy emphasized the point, suggesting that the youths take credit as a group because the project gives them an empowering new sense of belonging.

In his own formative years, Rudy encountered two men, a comic book artist and an art teacher, who took some interest in his talent, but mostly he was self-taught. He had neither an advocate nor a mentor. As a teen, the autobiographical "Hunger for Memory: The Education of Richard Rodriguez" influenced him. In it, Rodriguez writes of living in a house with few rooms, and the need to find a small corner in which to write and escape the chaos of his life. Visual art was Rudy's escape from a similar life, providing shelter from the negativity surrounding him.

Sitting in my living room, Rudy tells about his childhood in a segregated Mexican neighborhood in Chicago, the metro area with the fifth-largest Latino population in the U.S.

"Growing up there, I feel like I personally faced a lot of the issues that the families and populations that I serve are experiencing," Rudy said. "And so I feel like it is the foundation for the work I am doing now with a lot of predominantly Latino families that are impoverished, gang affected, dealing with legal issues. It's a lot of the same stuff my family grew up with." Emotions are close to the surface when he talks about the most wounded kids.

Rudy finally got out of his Chicago barrio by joining the Marines, where he served from 1992 until 1996. In 1999, when he arrived in Portland, he felt he'd hit rock bottom and was seeking stability and faith.

About 10 years ago, he was introduced to the Lakota community, under the leadership of John Bravehawk, whom he calls his adoptive father. This group has become his spiritual anchor. He helps at sweat lodge ceremonies and generally serves as a spiritual servant of the people. Mentored by elders, this relationship has strengthened Rudy's ties to his Mexican roots, which influence and enrich his work.

His interest in murals began back in inner-city Chicago, where he did graffiti cleanup on a large scale with other graffiti artists, and gained momentum in Portland as word of mouth and more projects

established his reputation. He is proud of his personal accomplishments: medals from his service in the Marines during the first Gulf War, a bachelor's degree in art from Portland State University and the Skidmore Prize, which he received in 2008 for his contribution to nonprofit organizations that directly benefit Portland. He has two sons — Mateo in Portland and Andres in Hilo, Hawaii.

These days, Rudy works with diverse community partners who identify at-risk boys and girls and also sponsor his work. These include the Latino Network, the Aztec Dancers, the Multnomah County Department of Community Justice, pear, the Regional Arts and Culture Council, the Mackenzie River Gathering Foundation, and Portland Parks and Recreation.

In his bread-and-butter job with the nonprofit Latino Network, Rudy is a social worker, case manager and resource specialist. He works with legal and immigration issues, in finding ways to get the lights back on for his clients, and with the entire range of poverty-related hurdles he knows too well. Lately, the Network took over the fiscal sponsorship of Rudy's art projects by co-applying for grant funds. The new sponsorship has freed him up to begin mentoring gang-affected teens of all races, as well as boys housed in Portland's Donald E. Long Detention Center for youths.

"These kids are raw and need intensive intervention," he said. "The ones who have experienced horrible things basically shut you out and have this non-expression, a blasé kind of smile that is so telling." He recently received news that the Multnomah County Department of Justice has given permission for him to set up a traditional sweat lodge once a month at the detention center. Biweekly activities such as mural arts and Aztec dancing will also be made available to the youths.

"My work is spiritual," Rudy said, "based on a foundation of love." Rudy knows he will not have an impact on all kids. He simply wants the chance.

Penelope J. Lichtowich is a Northeast Portland resident and proud grandma to Mateo Serna, Rudy's 7-year-old son.