



Murals like this one by local artist Jordan Karpe in Conway can tell the community's story and be an economic development tool.

## Community murals as economic development tools

By Amy Whitehead and Katelyn Wilkins

**T**he arts can be a useful tool for economic development at the local level. Many municipalities in Arkansas are beginning to embrace arts-based initiatives as a development tool.

“Arts programs and quality-of-place initiatives are the minimum price of admission when competing in a global marketplace for jobs and investment,” said Tim Allen, President and CEO of the Fort Smith Regional Chamber of Commerce. “On a local level, community murals and other arts initiatives encourage a sense of excitement among the citizens and promote reinvestment in downtown.”

Recently featured in state publications was a weeklong festival in Fort Smith called The Unexpected Project: A Festival of Murals, where artists from around the world converged on the city to paint seven murals as part of a larger arts-based festival. Other cities, such as Conway and North Little Rock, have embraced arts as a strategy for tapping into community talent and expanding the cultural offerings of the community in order to create the kind of place where residents and visitors are eager to live and visit.

Americans for the Arts, a leading nonprofit for advancing the arts, provides insight on why the arts can have a positive impact on the economy, including:

- Arts are an export industry—\$72 billion was the export value of the arts in 2011.
- Arts drive tourism—the U.S. Department of Commerce reports that the percentage of international travelers visiting museums on their trips to the U.S. has steadily increased since 2003.
- Arts strengthen the economy—the U.S. Bureau of Economic Analysis reports that the arts and culture sector represents 3.25 percent of GDP, and generates \$135 billion in economic activity annually.
- Arts are good for local merchants—attendees at nonprofit arts events spend money on meals, parking, and babysitters, thus stimulating the economy.

Many cities that want to begin working on a community-based arts initiative begin with a mural in their downtown area. According to Dr. Gayle Seymour, Associate Dean of UCA's College of Fine Arts and Communication, there are reasons this may be a good place to start. They can be fast and cheap. Though the process for creating a mural can take close to a year, the actual time needed to paint the mural is only one to two months. Considering the high cost of other development projects, murals only cost between \$25,000 and \$35,000 for the artist, scaffolding, paints, signage, and



PHOTO BY DR. GAYLE SEYMOUR.

other supplies. This makes them financially accessible to many communities, though pooling of local resources is usually necessary.

"Most grants in the arts are made to nonprofit organizations (schools, arts agencies, etc.) and require matching funds, usually a 1:1 match," Seymour said. "This requires many partners who can contribute cash, personnel, supplies, in-kind services, etc. Easy options are Arkansas Arts Council and Mid-America Arts Alliance."

Once murals are complete, they are safe and easy. Murals also require limited maintenance. According to her experience, Seymour advised that murals can last up to 25 years if an appropriate site is selected and properly prepared. Finally, one of the most important aspects of a mural is its connection to community history

and values. This provides community attachment to the mural, making people more likely to want to preserve the mural while also attracting tourists looking for art that reflects local culture. If a city is interested in creating a mural, the local team should seek ways to involve the community either through design or artist selection, site selection, and/or assisting with painting the mural with oversight from the artist. For a truly community-based mural, selection of the right artist will mean that person will listen to and involve the public, as well as champion the process.

Murals have the opportunity to tell the community's story, create a unique experience, engage citizens, increase foot traffic and tourism, increase appreciation for the arts and artists, and increase overall attractiveness of the space. Allen sees this as the case for Fort Smith.

"When a company or consultant visits Fort Smith, the economic development benefit of the arts is evident; they see we are growing our community, supporting the arts, and creating a vibrant quality of place for their employees and families," Allen said. "This makes Fort Smith more competitive when compared to larger cities with a robust arts program."

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