



Community canvas: Murals improve our cities and towns

By Emily Cooper Yates

Public murals are exciting and colorful pieces of art, and they can also be community development tools. Murals can serve as part of a community’s marketing strategy. They allow cities and towns to display what makes them unique and illustrate their story. Drab walls turned into vibrant pieces stop people in their tracks, encourage them to take and share selfies, and create a lasting memory associated with your city.

Murals also serve as a catalyst for creative placemaking, a process in community development in which community members utilize arts and culture to implement change and improve quality of life. Murals unite neighbors, empower local artists and instill excitement and pride among citizens.

Murals are popping up in cities and towns across Arkansas, and not just in major metropolitan areas. The Fort Smith nonprofit 64.6 Downtown hosts an annual event called The Unexpected, which highlights the installation of murals from world-renowned artists. Arkansas mural artist Jason White painted murals with the theme of unity in Newport and Cabot and even assisted in the development of an “art alley” in his hometown of Searcy.

With the creation of a mural class offered at Lyon College that mobilizes student artists, murals

are creating a buzz in Batesville. The city has seen an increase in tourism as a result of the murals. “People come to Batesville to see the murals,” Mayor Rick Elumbaugh says. “This a huge asset for our upcoming bicentennial celebration.”

The idea of painting a large public mural can be overwhelming. Misti Staley, mural workshop leader for the Thrive Center in Helena-West Helena, offers the following pieces of advice:

1. Find and prepare your canvas

One of the first steps when planning a mural is to determine a location. Ideally, it is a high-visibility spot so everyone in town and visitors can see it. Also consider the composition of your “canvas.” The wall’s surface will determine the time, effort and materials required for the project. For example, rustic walls made of exposed brick have deep grout lines, requiring more time and paint to cover.

After picking a location, you will need to prep and prime the wall for painting. The wall needs to be as clean as possible to extend the life of the mural. Scrape off old paint—consider power washing—and then coat the wall in primer. This work can be done with the help of your team of artists or volunteers.



2. Assemble your artists and volunteers

Michelangelo did not complete the Sistine Chapel ceiling on his own! However, your mural team does not have to include Italy's most skilled renaissance painters. Like with any community project, utilize your assets and partnerships. Public schools and colleges are full of aspiring artists. The Thrive Center, for example, offers youth programming that encourages students in Phillips County to design and paint their own murals. Staley says children as young as 8 years old can contribute directly to the mural in some way. Younger painters can work on base coats and older painters can focus on fine lines and details. Break the work into segments by assigning afterschool shifts for volunteers.

3. Determine your medium

Creating a masterpiece requires the correct set of materials and tools. The mural supply list includes paint brushes, exterior house paint, drop cloths and smocks, among other things. Staley specifically recommends 1.5- to 2-inch angled brushes to shape clean edges and a 2-in-1 primer/paint for thick coats of paint. These materials can be inexpensive and found at a local home improvement store. However, take care of your tools



Thrive Design Crew students working on the mural.

to extend their use. At the end of each day, wash your brushes and correctly store your cans of paint.

Murals are more than art. They are community assets that help move our cities and towns forward. Like any major endeavor, work with a team and take it step by step. Creative community projects unite residents and celebrate the arts. How will you color your community?

To learn more about how to develop a mural in your community, contact Staley at mististaley@gmail.com. For more information about the Thrive Center, visit thrivecenter.org.



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