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Teens' mural remembers four lost friends and cries out for peace

Posted by Matt Rocheleau July 13, 2011 01:52 PM

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(Courtesy: Family Service of Greater Boston)

By Matt Rocheleau, Town Correspondent

Driven by the tragic murders of four fellow teens they knew well, a team of Boston youth committed themselves to an emotional, personal project.

The large painted mural is both a memorial to their four peers and a plea for an end to violence.

It is “time to take back our streets,” the art piece declares.

The work was completed through a youth leadership program last August. But – in the wake of a rash of [some-fatal stabbings and shootings across the city](#) so far this summer – the mural’s message remains as timely and crucial as it was a year ago, program officials said.

“All of them were impacted by the death of those four youth in one way or another,” said Patricia Kiessling, a director at [Family Service of Greater Boston](#), referring to the 14 teens from the organization’s YouthAim! program who collaborated with a local graffiti artist to design the mural.

“Boston’s a small world when it comes to youth,” she continued. “There’s a lot of interaction between the school system, riding the T together and at city parks.”

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The four murdered teens, who program officials declined to name out of privacy for their families, were among 142 homicides that had occurred in Boston over a 31-month span, between the start of 2008 up until when the mural was completed.

The fourth friend who was killed around this time last year was a former member of the program. Around one month after his death, the grieving teens began to work on the mural.

The hope is that their artistic expression will inspire their community to be "more peaceful and show each other love," said Kiessling.

"They've been concerned for a while about violence in the city of Boston and its effect on youth," she said, adding that the concern has become all-too-real for many of the program's members.

"A lot of youth I talk to say they don't feel safe in their own neighborhoods," Kiessling said. "Their feeling of being safe in their community has been robbed from them. I think it was very traumatic for all of them to lose someone they were close to, and I think working on this helped in the grieving process."

The painting took the youth around five weeks to complete. Nine teens who were regular members of YouthAim! and five others who were drawn to help with the project used old photos of their four departed peers to draw their faces into the artwork.

The canvas now hangs in the third-floor of the headquarters of YouthAim!'s 176-year-old parent organization on Heath Street in Jamaica Plain. The work is moveable and occasionally displayed at local events.

The youth leadership development program runs year-round with expanded programming during the non-school-time summer months.

The program allows participants, from age 15 to 19, to identify social justice topics they are concerned about, and within the context of their community, explore ideas, research, strategize, develop and then implement projects.

"The contradictory and highly complex messages youth face with daily through media and daily life in Boston are portrayed in their projects," program leaders said. "Each and every art activity or project has the theme of violence prevention."

This summer, the group is planning to host a basketball camp at the [Bromley-Heath housing development courts](#) – an area with a reputation for violence – in collaboration with a summer camp program there.

YouthAim! is also planning to host a summertime gathering to celebrate the community and install an art gallery related to violence prevention and social change.

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