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ALLSTON BRIGHTON, JAMAICA PLAIN

Boston's mural crew celebrates 20-year run, continues to leave its mark

Posted by Matt Rocheleau July 20, 2011 04:59 PM

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(Matt Rocheleau for Boston.com)

The mural on Franklin Street in Allston near the roadway's intersection with Harvard Avenue and Cambridge Street. Above the mural crew's ongoing artwork is an old mural painted on metal sheets and screwed into the side of the building by a private artist.

By Matt Rocheleau, Town Correspondent

If Lucy Saintcyr had never joined the city's mural-painting program six years ago, she imagines she would have headed down a career path full of office buildings and cubicles.

"I would've ended up with some desk job," the 21-year-old Dorchester native said.

Instead, Saintcyr has found something she can put her heart into.

"All I want to do now is art. There's nothing else I'm as passionate about," said the art school double-major standing on the curb of Franklin Street in Allston, near the busy intersection of Cambridge Street and Harvard Avenue.

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There, the [Mayor's Mural Crew](#), which celebrates its 20th year this summer, is using a large, street-level section of brick wall as one of their latest outdoor canvases.



(Matt Rocheleau for Boston.com)

Richard Sanchez, 15, paints in Allston.

The 40-by-14-foot work will map out a bird's eye view of buildings and streets in a neighborhood swath that comprises the Allston Village Main Streets district.

Using muted colors, the piece will include the major thoroughfares of Brighton, Commonwealth and Harvard avenues as well as Cambridge Street, and in the lower right-hand corner, the mural's building.

In 1991 artist Heidi Schork launched the program. The mural crew has completed around 250 temporary and permanent art projects over the past

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two decades, she said.

The initiative employs around 20 painters, who are between 15 and 17 years old and hired through the city's teen employment program, the Boston Youth Fund

Painting outside is often a hot, dirty and challenging job. "It's hard work, but it's fun. It's such a great sense of accomplishment for the kids to see it completed" the 53-year-old Schork said via phone, after answering the call from atop a ladder in Jamaica Plain.

On a concrete wall there, behind the football field grandstands of the nation's oldest public high school, the crew's other team of painters is working on an abstract mural of a well-decorated trophy case inside English High.

"It's not the product. It's the process," she continued. "It's a learning experience. We want teens from a range of experiences and we want them to teach one another, too. It brings kids from all parts of the city who might have never met or talked to each other otherwise."

"The murals are incidental," compared to what the program gives to its teen participants, Schork said. "But at the same time they're important. They have to be engaging and meaningful ... They're something that is going to be seen by thousands of people who walk by every day for say 10 or more years," before the mural is painted over or begins to chip and fade away.

The program tends to attract teens who enjoy art and have at least dabbled in drawing and painting before.

Boston Arts Academy juniors 16-year-old Enrique Santiago of Mattapan and 17-year-old Stephanie of Dorchester, who painted alongside one another on scaffolding set up at the Allston site, have taken art classes at school. So has 15-year-old Richard Sanchez of the South End. And, on a nearby platform, 16-year-old Molly Gurner, of Roslindale, has been painting portraits as a hobby for several years.

But, Schork said she's witnessed plenty of mural crew members pick up a paintbrush for their first time.

"We get the Picassos, and then, not quite," the program director said.

Greg Moorer, 17, of Dorchester and Jake Connolly, 16, of South Boston, each had limited painting experience before joining the mural crew team presently in Allston. They each said they'd helped paint a few bedroom or basement walls when they were younger.

Otherwise, "It was something new. I'd never painted anything like this before in my life," Moorer said.

They each said the mural had frustrated them at times. Drawing out a letter- and number-coded grid used as a reference for accurately laying out the artwork had to be redone once the young artists realized the wall was slightly slanted. And sketching the actual painting's design was tedious and challenging.

However, "This is something I'd recommend anyone to do. It's relaxing, soothing sometimes," Moorer said.

"It turns heads. Even when we were just priming the wall, people walking by were like 'hey, good job; we love it,'" said Connolly putting his thumbs up.

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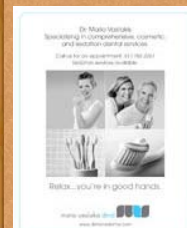
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Gregg Bernstein, the mural crew's 38-year-old assistant director, said sometimes the painters, especially those who have less experience, "get intimidated by the blank wall and the paint."

"But paint is really the best eraser there is. If you mess up, you can paint over it," he said.

The mural crew was originally established to eradicate graffiti problem areas in Boston. One of the initiative's oldest-standing paintings, completed in 1992, was painted over in recent months, not because of vandalism, but because it had simply aged and worn out. That Dorchester mural was located near Codman Square -- the first area the graffiti-fighting mural artists targeted.

"People writing graffiti understand a lot of work has gone into our projects, so they respect it," Schork said, adding that the crew's finished murals have been vandalized "very rarely."

Bernstein said he holds some appreciation for graffiti, because if it weren't for illegal tagging he wondered whether professionally-done murals would have become as prevalent as they are today.

"Graffiti is mural's dirty, distant, [illegal] cousin," said Bernstein, who joined the program 17 years ago and is leading the team working in Allston, where tagging is prevalent. "I feel like they're in the same family."

Bernstein's team soon hopes to move on to their second and final mural of the summer, which will be painted on an alley wall near a Dunkin Donuts on Harvard Avenue near Allston's border with Brookline.

Schork's team will paint their second and last summertime piece along Centre Street in Jamaica Plain near J.P. Licks.

Outdoor works are done in the summer; indoor painting is done after school during the academic year.

The murals are painted on both public- and privately-owned property – with the owner's consent, of course. Sometimes, the crew asks a property owner for permission; other times, the crew receives a call.

The designs are location dependent, said Schork. Sometimes they are suggested by others or the crew is inspired by the character of the neighborhood around them.

The summer program runs five days a week for five hours each day beginning at 8:30 a.m. The minimum wage work involves scraping, priming and two coats of paint. In some instances, like the Franklin Street wall in Allston, there's little to any shade during the work hours.

Saintcyr is studying graphic design and illustration at the Art Institute of Boston and plans to soon transfer to the Massachusetts College of Art and Design.

"There are a lot of programs out there where kids are sitting in A/C all day," she said, standing in the drenching midday sun in front of the Allston mural on a steamy Wednesday. But, "if it wasn't for this program, I wouldn't have gotten into art school. I wouldn't have gotten into the arts."

She added, "It's a godsend."

E-mail Matt Rocheleau at mjrochele@gmail.com.



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(Matt Rocheleau for Boston.com)

People passing through the busy Allston intersection often pause to watch the crew work, including the man standing on far left as well as members of the fire department's Engine 41 who, while stopped at a red light while returning from an emergency response on an adjacent street, spoke to the crew's assistant director Gregg Bernstein (center) and painter Richard Sanchez, 15.

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