



## Peace by Piece

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### **30 Oakland youth rejuvenate their communities one spray can at a time.**

A group of 30 youth huddle around an Oakland street corner. They're armed with spray cans, with dozens of boxes stacked on the sidewalk and spilling out of a shopping cart. From top to bottom, end to end, they cover an empty wall on the corner of 83rd and MacArthur Avenues, giving life to a once blighted building. The residents who gather around them couldn't be more proud. The mural depicts three young women -- innocent bystanders who fell victim to gang crossfire.



"Wow," says Aileen Robinson, 53, as she stares with teary eyes at the portrait of Kennah Wilson, her 18-year-old granddaughter-in-law who was seven months pregnant when she was gunned down last August. She was telling a group of friends and neighbors about her upcoming baby shower. "You can't help but to remember -- remember good, happy times," Robinson says.



Also depicted in the mural are Shaneice Davis, 21, who was killed by stray gunfire as she slept in her apartment last April, and Tommiesha Lynn Jones, 16, who was shot and killed in 2005 while riding in a car in Richmond. All three young women memorialized by the Community Rejuvenation Project were residents who lived in the apartments across from where the mural now stands.

"The people that were chosen were at the wrong place at the wrong time, innocent victims who didn't get the chance to maximize their potential. That's what this is about in a lot of ways -- for the community to really see their people honored," says Desi W.O.M.E., who leads the Community Rejuvenation Project, a summer youth program of the Lao Family Community Development center.

Desi, who adopted his graffiti crew's name -- Weapons of Mass Expression, or Warriors of Mother Earth -- as his last name, works a spray can with Picasso-like precision. The 31-year-old's youthful energy is belied only by his neatly shaped goatee and lamb chop sideburns; otherwise, the stocky art instructor would blend in perfectly with his students. Under his leadership, the Community Rejuvenation Project employs and teaches job skills to 30 youth from ages 14 to 24. The project involves community clean-up, landscaping, surveying community members and painting murals, with a block party to unveil and celebrate the completed project. Over the course of five weeks, the youth will produce four murals throughout Oakland.



"What we're doing is trying to build up the culture of murals in Oakland and the Bay Area in general, try[ing] to build up another generation of people that will solidly hold it down for us," says Desi. He explains that Oakland has many cultural writers and muralists but the city's barren public walls don't reflect their presence. "There's a lot of stuff that's on



the periphery -- on the rooftops and at the tracks. I want to put us back at the forefront," he says.

In order to make cultural art more visible, Desi is empowering youth with an arsenal of color.

### **Weapons of Expression**

Desi's apartment might as well be a paint supply store.

"It's two bedrooms, but you see what I'm married to, right?" he says.

While others have shelves stacked with books, his are stacked with colorful spray cans, ranging from Himalaya Blue to Supernova Pink and every oddly-named hue in between. "We're short right now, we probably only have 300 cans," he says.

Desi is pro-graffiti and has been a purveyor of the art form for nearly 20 years, both legally and illegally. He heads the Arrow-Soul Council, an after-school program at Unity High School in Oakland, and was a lead art activist in the wake of the Oscar Grant shooting. He has led similar youth mural projects all over the country, from New York and Santa Fe to Wounded Knee, South Dakota. While the murals are rooted in graffiti art, it's much more than tags.



"We're definitely down to buck the system on all levels but, at the same time, we're not at war with our communities. We're not here to battle our neighbors," Desi says. "Instead of taking it in this route where it's all about me and my name, we're showing the kids that, yo, you can take it in this route where it's all about your community, it's all about your people, it's all about your ancestors, it's all about those that are still coming and repping that."

### **The Next Step**

21-year-old Kaleb Arefaine is a youth employee for the Community Rejuvenation Project. He's been doing graffiti since his early teens and has known Desi for four years. At first, he says his graffiti was "vandalism gone bad." Now, he considers it a conduit of expression and a form of healing.



"Desi always told me, 'Go to the next step.' Now I'm taking it to the next level and doing it legally," Arefaine says. "This whole community, this whole city needs a lot of cleaning. A lot of people ain't starting it, so I guess we're going to be the start. Hopefully everyone sees us and gets inspired and does the same thing, but we're just trying to make a change right now."



Marcos Gonzalez, 20, acts as an unofficial assistant to Desi. He's known Desi for six years and he's been doing graffiti since he was 11 years old.

"[Graffiti is] kind of like a double-ended sword where it's illegal but it makes something beautiful," Gonzalez says. Though graffiti is a controversial art form, its taboo nature wasn't the only lure for Gonzalez. "If you're from the hood [and] you ain't got money to go to an arts school, what's the cheapest thing you can do?"

On the adjacent side of the building stands Franceyez Jackson, 23, a youth leader, musician and self-proclaimed "artivista." He too has worked with Desi for several years and has helped with community murals for Barack Obama's campaign as well as the Silence the Violence campaign in Oakland. He helps the younger employees "by giving them a spark of confidence, [like] a spark plug to this big car that we're driving -- off biodiesel, of course,"



he says. He helps teach them how to draw, cartoon, illustrate and paint, as well as go door-to-door to survey community members. "You learn how to interact with people and deliver the message at the same time -- that's what the revolution is all about."

## Off the Wall

Godadevi and Radhika Dhimal, 17 and 16 respectively, are refugees from Nepal who were brought to the U.S. three months ago. The sisters are shy and often huddle with the other recent immigrants in the program. But when given a nudge from mural teacher Mike360 and his flute, both break out into Nepalese song.



Radhika, in her best English, explains that she enjoys working on the mural. "My favorite part is painting," she says.

The Dhimal sisters came to the Community Rejuvenation Project through a Nepalese employee at the Lao Family Development Center, who helped them secure this summer job.

"When a lot of the Bhutanese and Nepalese people come here, many of them have the same experiences as us when we first started," says Kathy Chao, executive director at Lao Family Community Development in Oakland. "Many of our staff have that same experience, so they understand. These kids are just dying for jobs and helping to earn income for their family and have exposure to a field."

The Community Rejuvenation Project is one of several summer youth programs offered by Lao Family Community Development, an organization originally founded in 1980 to aid Southeast Asian refugees. They now serve over 10,000 people from more than 30 nationalities. The project is funded through federal stimulus money granted to the center by the Oakland Workforce Investment Board. The Oakland WIB, along with the Mayor's Office and the City of Oakland, devised an initiative to create more than 1,000 jobs this summer for at-risk, low-income Oakland youth between 14 and 24 years old. Lao Family is responsible for 150 of these jobs with 30 of them devoted to the mural project. The \$8.00 an hour they earn for their roughly 30-hour work weeks goes a long way.



"For many of them, this is their first job and if they're new to the country, they're learning not only English for the first time, but the American work environment," Chao says. "For many, the money that they earn from this job is really critical for their family's well-being. This goes up to 24 years old, so these are adults, and some of them have kids and they're supporting their family. The summer opportunity is income that's really important to feeding their children, to pay their rent, to live."



### **Planting Seeds**

Tracking down each Community Rejuvenation Project mural is almost like a scavenger hunt. The murals are spread throughout East Oakland with each representing a different stage of growth.

Vibrant colors bounce off of the wall at the corner of 46th Ave. and Foothill Blvd.,

the site of the first mural. A 10- by 30-foot expanse is filled with a lush palette of soft and sharp earth tones -- various shades of browns, greens, reds, blues, oranges and tans -- that wrap around the corner, creating a colorful landscape that can be spotted from a distance. Cars flying down Foothill slow down to try and make sense of the shapes and colors.

"What I like about the corners is that you can't look at the whole mural at once. You have to see it in different places and angles, and each angle has its own perspective," Desi explains.

The first mural shows a seed being planted to symbolize conception, both of the next generation and of the new vision for the community. The second (83rd and MacArthur Ave.) is the seed being germinated. The murals incorporate portraits of those in the community as well as images of a farmer plowing a field and a pregnant woman to represent the seed growing.



The third and fourth murals (23rd Ave. and Foothill Blvd.; Foothill Blvd. and Fairfax Ave.) feature images of native warriors -- protectors of the community -- and elders. Together, the murals compose the full circle of the stages of life. While there's plenty of planning that goes into the artworks, Desi explains that all of the ideas and concepts developed organically.

"No matter how much we try to think about it ahead of time, a lot of these concepts have grown as we paint and it's always been like that for all the murals that I work on,"

Desi says. "We have revelations [while we're painting] and we incorporate that into the murals."

Desi also hopes that the youth will reflect on their work when they're older.

"If the youth really look back on this, they might see new things that they didn't quite recognize," says Desi.



"I'm hopeful that this continues to spark new understanding, that this is a continual dialogue."

## **The Harvest**

On a recent work day, Community Rejuvenation Project participants put shapes together and fill in lines. Several youth stand on ladders while others sweep and clean the street. Anupa Thapa, 17, also a recent refugee from Nepal, stands at the top of a ladder, stretching as far as she can to paint the very top of the wall. Desi convinces her to climb on top of the building and paint from the roof.

"It's okay, the roof's sturdy. But don't use too much of the same color," Desi says.

Jun Osalbo, a resident and City of Oakland employee, drives by in his pick-up truck. He stops. He doesn't quite understand what's going on in the mural but is appreciative nonetheless.



"This is nice to see," Osalbo says to a group of workers. "Hopefully, the kids won't graffiti it anymore because every week it's always new graffiti there. And now you're putting a mural there and it's nice and pretty and the kids would know not to graffiti it anymore. Thank you."

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