



Oakland North

St. Vincent de Paul reaches out to the community through art



1 A client of St. Vincent de Paul paints on the panel to be displayed at the community center.

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Crowded in the back of St. Vincent de Paul's community center in downtown Oakland, dozens of people paint an extensive wood panel with a mosaic of images—trees, faces, buildings and flowers and words like "peace," "love" and "kiss." They're creating a work for display on the outside wall of the center, but these painters aren't professional artists, they're low-income and homeless clients of St. Vincent de Paul.

Scanning the progress of the painters, Desi W.O.M.E., founder of the Community Rejuvenation Project and an organizer of the painting event, says, "It's coming out crazy, I love it." This is the second painting project that St. Vincent de Paul of Alameda, a nonprofit that works with people in need, has organized. By bringing in artists like

W.O.M.E. to work with their clients, the organization hopes to give people a chance to express themselves in a creative way.

"Everyone rich or poor has an aspiration to be creative and contribute," says Philip Arca, the executive director of St. Vincent de Paul of Alameda. "We are working with the community to address its challenges and art has always done that."

One woman, Florida McDuff, crouches down to paint the bottom part of the panel. She looks over at her neighbor who is painting a tree with thick roots and says, "That is so cool!" As McDuff brushes on ochre-colored paint, she says she loves that St. Vincent de Paul is doing this project. "There's a lot of unity here, there's a lot of creativity," she says. "It's the unity thing, that's why I'm here."



2 The first mural, which was painted over the holidays, is on display outside the community center.

Volunteers from Community Rejuvenation Project, a mural and beautification program based in Oakland, first painted a blue background color onto the 8-foot high by 20-foot wide piece of waterproofed wood, then divided the panel up by lightly painting on a grid of small individual blocks. Each block is assigned a different color and then anyone can paint whatever design or image they like onto the blocks. When done, the final painting will have the effect of a multi-hued quilted pattern.

"Have you painted a square yet?" ask volunteers, as they hand out plastic plates filled with paint. "Let's find you a spot."

The collaboration between Community Rejuvenation Project and St. Vincent de Paul first started when W.O.M.E. was painting a series of spray-paint murals down the street from the community center. "One of the people who works here approached us and said, 'Yo, we gotta have you come through,'" W.O.M.E. says.

Typically his crew does spray-paint murals with themes like gun violence, racism and poverty, so this project is a little different. But the fundamental reasons behind the art are the same, W.O.M.E. says. "Our paintings are about the underlying things that are personal inside you," he says. "We want people to be affected by them."

Community Rejuvenation Project's goal is produce art for the entire community to enjoy, especially in low-income neighborhoods. "We target the most blighted areas—the spots that need the most love," says W.O.M.E. "It's the antithesis to the broken windows theory, we want to transform the community from within."

For St. Vincent de Paul it's a natural fit. "We have been here for 30 years and we'll always serve hot meals, but we also try to do more than that," Arca says. "It's all in the spirit of being part of the community."

This particular panel is being painted specifically for the men's center, which provides a range of services to help economically disadvantaged men, and will be displayed on the side of the community center. St. Vincent de Paul plans to continue hosting group-painting events and to rotate the panels every six months. They will also be displayed on the outside wall of the non-profit's East Oakland site, which Arca says could use some prettifying.

"We want to have it be something tangible for the community to do together," he says. "For this community, I think this should represent a positive space."

Source: <http://oaklandnorth.net/2011/02/02/st-vincent-de-paul-reaches-out-to-the-community-through-art/>