

Transforming San Pablo Avenue, through murals

April 12, 2012

Desi W.O.M.E, the founder of the Community Rejuvenation Project, says he wants to “transform the San Pablo corridor” by engaging the local community with a series of murals focused on sustainable practices. His plan is to take a huge wall—tagged with graffiti but otherwise blank—and talk to members of the community about what they’d like to see in a mural, then work out a deal with the owner of the building. Then, he says, local artists will turn the vision into a reality.



“It’s almost like watching flowers spring out of a bed,” said W.O.M.E, who uses an acronym for his last name. “You’re walking down the street and every step you take, a new flower springs up. That’s what these murals are hopefully going to be doing for the community.”

The Community Rejuvenation Project is a collection of artists who paint murals in blighted areas, mostly in the East Bay. The group often partners with community organizations like Richmond Spokes, a nonprofit that trains young people in bicycle repair services, or local schools, including ARISE and Unity High Schools in East Oakland.



The idea for a series of murals down San Pablo Avenue came about last year during meetings of the Golden Gate Community Alliance, a neighborhood group that’s trying to improve the area. The group identified a few spots in the neighborhood that were ideal for murals—visible walls facing San Pablo where they could get permission from the owner to paint.

One of the first places identified for a

mural was on the side of the Gateway Liquor store, on the corner of San Pablo and 60th Street. The group, in association with the San Pablo Avenue Golden Gate Improvement Association, then fundraised through Actual Café's "Bicycle Bingo" night, raising nearly half of the mural's \$1,200 cost. They contacted W.O.M.E about having some artists paint the mural.

"We wanted something that would abate graffiti but also be something for people to enjoy," said Larry Bragg, a neighbor and member of the Golden Gate Community Alliance.

Artists associated with the Community Rejuvenation Project have created more than 50 murals around Oakland since 2009, including a 200-foot-wide mural with "Decolonize" written in big block letters near the Fruitvale BART station, and many near the site of the Parkway Theater, like "Spiritual Release" by artist Miss Ammo. It's a bright purple and orange painting with a picture of a man in a hood reaching out with his arms, which was inspired by the killing of Trayvon Martin and completed April 1. The murals focus on environmental awareness and sustainable practices, W.O.M.E said, and often incorporate portraits of local leaders and legends like the Black Panther Party.

The group's first new mural to go up in the Golden Gate—"Pedal Power to the People"—was painted last weekend on the side of Gateway Liquor. The mural depicts a bright, multi-colored landscape filled with plants that are sprouting up, waterways, and a man on a bike who is pulling plants and flowers. "We're trying to create a more sustainable transportation economy," W.O.M.E said of the mural's message.

W.O.M.E said Community Rejuvenation Project artists don't just design one mural in an area and leave, they stay to paint numerous murals. He said the group wants to "shake up" the blight policy in East Bay cities by making sure art has a place in abated areas. "We're trying to engage the city to reform their practices into those that will engage the community more and involve more permanent solutions, like murals," he said.



More than that, though, he's hoping the murals will instill pride in people that live in the neighborhoods where they're being installed. "Hopefully people will have that increased self esteem and can see that someone cares about our community and is painting this artwork that reflects us," he said.

Go here for more information on the Community Rejuvenation Project or here for information on the Golden Gate Community Alliance.

Source: <http://oaklandnorth.net/2012/04/12/transforming-san-pablo-through-murals/>