

# In Oakland, where public safety and public art intersect

By LUISA CARDOZA • MAY 11, 2016

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"Silence the Violence" - East Oakland  
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There's a lot of graffiti at 60th Avenue and MacArthur Boulevard in East Oakland. Tags in various colors are thrown up on storefronts all along the street, but the mural on the side of Aswad, Inc., screenprinting shop remains untouched.

The mural features an image of the shop's owner Aswad Hayes, arms outstretched, his palms facing two guns that are pointed at him. He's screaming in anguish, head thrown back. The piece, entitled "Silence the Violence," includes the names of every homicide victim in Oakland from 2013.

"You know, when you see them just compiled together, it just makes a big statement," Hayes says. "The impact is big when you realize how many people's lives and how many families' lives have been touched or lost."

Hayes says most people who come to look at the mural have a loved one listed on it, and that they always thank him.

"They let me know they appreciate me thinking about their folks and putting them up there like that, and having their name ... and their memory commemorated in art.

After seeing the list of victims in the Oakland Tribune, Hayes worked with mural arts organization Community Rejuvenation Project (CRP) to paint the piece. It was a collaboration with high school youth and was paid for with a grant from the East Oakland Building Healthy Communities. In addition to painting murals with youth, CRP has a service they call "abatement murals for businesses." They say it's a way of keeping graffiti in check, for walls that see a lot of vandalism. But the organization is not just concerned about combating taggers. They also want to promote positive thinking and a sense of pride in neighborhoods where they paint.

Eric Arnold, CRP's Communications Director, says of the over 100 murals CRP has painted in the last five years, all have been painted with the intention of being holistic. He means that rather than thinking of painting for a community, they try to work *with* the communities where the murals are going up.

"You come in there, and you do a mural, you know, at first people are checking you out like, 'What are YOU doing here? You're not from around here,'" Arnold explains. "We talk to them, and we make them feel like they're a part of what we're doing."

But Arnold says it isn't just about being friendly.

"We go into all these areas that are low-income, high-crime, high-pollution areas, and we paint beautiful murals that uplift communities ... and yes, that does positively influence public safety."

Arnold believes murals can serve a dual role: They can inspire people to feel pride in where they live, but they can also help newcomers to a neighborhood understand its history. Sometimes, it's a delicate balance.

"One of the things we don't want to do is just sort of make art that's a welcoming wagon for gentrification. That's actually why Community Rejuvenation Project puts so much emphasis on community engagement. We sort of feel like our primary responsibility is to the people that already live here," Arnold says.

Some of this tension can be seen in the story of CRP's biggest project to date: the Alice Street mural, at Alice and 14th Street in downtown Oakland. The project was subsidized by public funds and was a collaboration between CRP and residents of the neighborhood, including the Malonga Casquelourd Center, a hub for African dance and arts, and Hotel Oakland, which houses Chinese seniors. The mural depicts many of these residents, and the rich mix of cultures that have shaped the area. Arnold says that for a neighborhood in transition, this visual representation is a big deal.

"A lot of people that are on the wall, are still living," Arnold says. "It ... becomes an indicator to new residents that, ok, this is the history that happened before you got here. It gives them some context of the city they're now living in."

Ironically, not long after its completion in 2015, a developer purchased the vacant lot that faces the murals. They plan to build a 126-unit residential tower, which would completely cover the art. CRP and its supporters rallied together to appeal the project. They recently scored a huge victory when the developer agreed to pay \$100,000 in community concessions to repaint the mural at a new location, possibly at nearby Laney College.

Arnold is optimistic that the relocated mural on a very public wall at the community college could be very important to get students thinking — about their communities, and how they fit into them.

But CRP doesn't just want to create art for people to look at, they also want to teach people how to make it for themselves. The organization has been teaching students aerosol art for close to a decade at Unity Charter High School in East Oakland. Freshman Kelly To says she's always been intrigued by graffiti and aerosol art. It connects her to where she lives.

"I feel like Oakland is the city where you think about art," says To. "It's just, like, really cool to see art around. It makes Oakland, Oakland."

Desi Mundo, To's teacher at Oakland Unity High School and CRP's founder, says blank walls in the community have always been spaces where youth can express and define themselves. Mundo hopes CRP's work can help transform the fear and stereotypes society has of teenagers of color. He says adults often dismiss young people, and that pushes them away, rather than helping them feel a part of where they live. Mundo says he wants the youth of Oakland to be a part of the conversation, to have a seat at the table.

"Within the public art sphere, I want to move the mural conversation that we have inside the schools out onto the streets, and give the young people in our community ownership of the spaces that they reside in."

But, like Eric Arnold, Mundo has some concerns: "There's been a lot of manipulation both of public safety and artwork for the gentrification of Oakland."

It's the old story of artists moving into a "blighted" community, sprucing it up, and then "coming behind them are the more affluent people who really increase that displacement at a much [more rapid] rate," says Mundo. "As people who are creating public artwork, we need to be creating artwork that builds up the capacity of the existing communities, without pushing people out."

Through teaching, mural-making and involvement with planning policy, Mundo and CRP hope to bring — and keep — people together.

**EDITOR'S NOTE: A previous version of this article contained errors which have been corrected.**

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