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The Art of Recovery in Philadelphia: Murals as Instruments of Personal and Community Healing

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In 2004/2005, a series of citywide focus groups on behavioral health service needs sparked what came to be christened “the recovery revolution in Philadelphia” (White, 2007). This fundamental redesign of behavioral health care involved an expansion of peer recovery support resources, a shift in professional treatment emphasis from acute stabilization to long-term recovery support, and the mobilization of individuals and families in recovery as a cultural force for personal healing and community renewal (Achara-Abrahams, Evans, & King, 2011).

This redesign process, which has made the city of Philadelphia a beacon of hope and model of systems transformation in behavioral health care, has been guided by several foundational principles (Evans, 2008).

- Individuals and families who have been historically defined as part of their community’s “problem” can be engaged to become a healing force (“recovery carriers”) within these same communities.
- Communities can themselves become wounded and in need of a recovery process.
- Personal, family, and community recovery are inextricably linked; effective recovery strategies must touch all of these levels and affect their interrelationships.
- Building personal, family, and community “recovery capital” requires creative approaches that counter imbedded hopelessness and resignation and stir hope and regeneration (White, Evans, & Lamb, 2010).

Community recovery has been defined as a voluntary process through which a community uses the assertive resolution of alcohol and other drug-related problems as a vehicle for collective healing, community renewal, and enhanced intergenerational resilience. Community recovery is more than the personal recovery of community members; it involves strengthening the connective tissue

between those with and without such problems while restoring and sustaining the quality of community life (White et al., 2010).

This article explores how art has emerged as a unique strategy to promote personal, family, and community recovery and health in the city of Philadelphia. More specifically, it reviews the history of the Philadelphia Mural Arts Program, highlights the Mural Arts Porch Light Initiative, and describes how the mural development process has served as a catalyst for personal change and community renewal.

The Philadelphia Mural Arts Program

The Philadelphia Mural Arts Program was founded in 1996 as an outgrowth of the Philadelphia Anti-Graffiti Network (PAGN), which was established by the City in 1984 to work with youth arrested for graffiti or other minor crimes. The early vision of the PAGN was to channel the abilities of graffiti artists into projects that would elevate rather than deface the community. Since that time, the broader Mural Arts Program has involved thousands of artists and citizens in the creation of more than 3,000 murals that now grace the Philadelphia landscape and draw tourists from around the world. The mission of the Mural Arts Program is to “unite artists and communities through a collaborative process, rooted in the traditions of mural-making, to create art that transforms public spaces and individual lives.” The Mural Arts Program is overseen in part by the city of Philadelphia and in part by a 22-member board of directors.

The Mural Arts Program engages with more than 100 Philadelphia neighborhoods each year and also works with adult and juvenile correctional institutions to include adults and youth returning to the community in mural projects. The themes that permeate these murals range from celebration of cultural heritage to day-to-day community life. The murals collectively celebrate intergenerational family relationships, health, work, learning, sport, artistic achievement, public service, faith, community character, and resilience. The images are ones that inspire, expand possibilities, and elicit wonder, as well as honor and connect people.





The Mural Development Process

The process used to create the murals is as important to the city of Philadelphia and its neighborhoods as the resulting artwork. Each completed mural represents a prolonged three- to six-month process of engagement between the lead artist, community leaders, and neighborhood residents. Every effort is made to ensure that murals are available to Philadelphia's diverse cultural communities. The process starts with a mural application since the demand for murals now exceeds available funding for these projects. Selection of successful applicants is followed by recruitment of a muralist whose unique background and skills best match the vision for the mural that has emerged from the community engagement process. This is followed by finalization of the mural location, dialogue with the community to further develop ideas for the mural, and formalization and implementation of the final mural plan.

The Mural Arts Program also is involved in mural development projects with adult and adolescent men and women at correctional facilities in the Philadelphia area, including The State Correctional Institution at Graterford, Riverside Correctional Facility for women, Curran-Fromhold Correctional Facility, the House of Correction, Philadelphia Industrial Correctional Center, Philadelphia Youth Study Center, St. Gabriel's Hall, and VisionQuest. Programs within these facilities are designed as vehicles of restorative justice through which inmates and youth are afforded opportunities through volunteer service in the arts to make amends to their communities.

Philadelphia's mural projects are rendered in diverse media: paint, glass, tile, woven tapestries, and sculpture. The finalized image of the mural moves from the artist's sketch to the building wall through one of four methods: 1) a grid system (through which the original image is divided into sections that are each then replicated in larger relief on the wall), 2) photo transfer (through which a photo of the original image is projected onto a wall, traced, and then rendered with paint and other materials), 3) stencil tracing (to outline the image and guide the artist), and 4) tracing of a projection on the wall. Volunteers are often engaged in the actual mural creation process. From start to finish, the Mural Arts staff work with local community organizations to host events (workshops, symposia, town meetings) to discuss and seek consensus on issues related to the central themes to be conveyed through the mural and to mobilize community action (Voices of Community, ND).





The Healing Power of Art

Through the mural development process—from application and conception to celebration of the completed mural—old relationships are renewed and new relationships are formed between people whose lives might otherwise never have intersected. The result is a healing web of community support and a community more connected and empowered to care for its own and to help fulfill the personal

destinies of its members. Jane Golden Heriza, Founder and Director of the Mural Arts Program, describes the power of this process as follows:

Murals work on a symbolic level, providing opportunities for communities to express important concerns, values and aspirations—their yearning to be free of violence and fear, their hopes for a better world, their desire for beauty. The murals also become catalysts for social change. Murals bring together residents to not only work on the design for the mural, but to discuss and implement strategies for neighborhood transformation. Murals can help bring residents together to create community pride, and catalyze community involvement in activities that range from block clean-ups to garden and art education programs for the young (Heriza, ND).





Early Behavioral Health Murals

The first Mural Arts Program projects that explicitly conveyed behavioral health themes were completed in 2008 and 2009. These murals, which were precursors to the launch of a special behavioral health mural initiative, are described and visually portrayed below.

Project: Recovery and Transformation
Theme: Recovery from mental health issues
Completion Date: July, 2008
Partners: Elwyn Institute, Wedge Center, Community Council, Path Center, COMHAR Center, Horizon House, and inmates from SCI Graterford Prison.
Artists: Eric Okdeh, assisted by David Gray and Desiree Bender
Poet: Angela Crafton
Location: Elywyn Institute – 4040 Market Street



Project: Bridging the Gap
Theme: overcoming conflict, accepting commonalities and differences, and healing.
Completion Date: April, 2008
Partners: ACANA (African Cultural Alliance of North America), Chester Avenue Business Association, Southwest CDC
Artists: Willis Humphrey, with special assistance by Twins Seven Seven
Location: Southern Inn Restaurant, 5741 Woodland Avenue



Project: Keeping Kids Safe

<p>Theme: Children’s needs for caring, responsibility, and participating in activities in safe environments.</p>
<p>Completion Date: June, 2009</p>
<p>Partners: Newbold Civic Association; representatives for the Department of Behavioral Health; the staff of Guerin Recreation Center; residents of the community; participating students from Mural Arts AVRP (Adolescent Violence Reduction Program) sites at Lutheran Family Services, Carson Valley School, Mothers in Charge, Diversified Community Services, Norris Square Civic Association, Shalom East, and Shalom South; and youth from the community.</p>
<p>Artists: Jonathan Laidacker, with mosaics by Mike Smash and Jonny Buss; participating students from Mural Arts AVRP (Adolescent Violence Reduction Program) sites at Lutheran Family Services, Carson Valley School, Mothers in Charge, Diversified Community Services, Norris Square Civic Association, Shalom East, and Shalom South; and youth from the community.</p>
<p>Location: Guerin Recreation Center – 17th & Jackson Streets</p>



Mural Detail



Mural Design

Project: La Siempre Presente Fuerza Curativa (The Always Present Curative Force)
Theme: Destigmatizing Mental Illness
Completion Date: October, 2009
Partners: Maria de los Santos Health Center (a component of Delaware Valley Community Health, Inc.)
Artists: Cesar Viveros and Pedro Ospina
Location: Maria De Los Santos Health Center, 5 th & Allegheny Avenue



Project: It's All About Community
Theme: Respect and understanding of persons with intellectual disabilities
Completion Date: May, 2010
Partners: Newbold Civic Association; representatives for the Department of Behavioral Health; the staff of Guerin Recreation Center; residents of the community; participating students from Mural Arts AVRP (Adolescent Violence Reduction Program) sites at Lutheran Family Services, Carson Valley School, Mothers in Charge, Diversified Community Services, Norris Square Civic Association, Shalom East, and Shalom South; and youth from the community.
Artist: Jon Laidacker, with mosaics by Mike Smash and Jonny Buss

Location: 6531-33 Germantown Avenue



The Porch Light Initiative

In 2009, the city of Philadelphia Mural Arts Program launched the Porch Light Initiative in collaboration with the Philadelphia Department of Behavioral Health and Intellectual disAbility Services, the Scattergood Foundation, and subsequent funding from the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation. The Porch Light Initiative is developing a series of 9 large community-based public art projects in three disadvantaged neighborhoods that will focus on recovery from addiction, mental illness, and its related problems. Working through hub agencies in each neighborhood, the project will also provide people in recovery and their families with opportunities to express their experiences through such media as artwork, storytelling, poetry, and improv theatre. The goals of these projects are to decrease stigma related to these issues, increase access to behavioral health services, improve the physical and “psychological” environment in the areas of the murals and to have a positive impact on the participants in project’s programming. To date, the following community-level projects have been completed or initiated.

Project: Finding Home
Theme: Hope for the Homeless
Completion Date: November, 2010
Partners: Project H.O.M.E. Bethesda, Lehigh Avenue Men’s Shelter, Horizon House, 1715 Montgomery Avenue Women’s Shelter, Arch Street Café, St. John the Evangelist Catholic Church, and a cross section of safe haven sites across the city.
Artists: Josh Sarantitus, Kathryn Pannepacker, Alvin Tull, and Shelby Donnelly
Location: 13 th Street behind SEPTA Headquarters



Project: Personal Renaissance
Theme: Addiction and Recovery
Completion Date: September, 2010
Partners: JEVS – ACT II, ProAct, youth from our ArtWorks site, Achieving Independence Center, and formerly incarcerated artists in our Re-Entry program.
Artist: James Burns Photographer: Mustafah Abdulaziz Graphic Designer: Rene Flint McCall
Location: Act II Center of JEVS Human Services building at 1745 N. 4 th St.



The poem written by a person in recovery that appears in the upper right hand corner of the Personal Renaissance mural reads as follows:

Discovering Recovery
 Empowering the person
 That I am,
 That I've become.
 The one I always was and
 Always have been,
 Held down by my own hand
 My own addiction
 Our affliction
 That effected everyone
 My self, family and community
 I am the positive face of
 Recovery—see inside me—
 My strength—my beauty
 And hear my voice!
 Take my fellow man/woman/
 Divinity
 Read the writing on my skin
 And know we are akin
 We are more alike than difference
 What is good for me is good for you
 We are one.

Project: Embrace Second Chances
Theme: Support for those in Recovery
Completion Date: October, 2009
Partners: CATCH (Citizens Acting Together Can Help)
Artists: Donald Gensler, assisted by University of Pennsylvania students and youth from the Mural Arts Program's Artworks program
Location: 1221 and 1211 South 15 th Street



Projects Underway for 2011

Three mural projects in this behavioral health series are in the planning stage for 2011 as a result of a grant from the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation. The themes have yet to be decided for the new murals, but the neighborhoods have been selected. They include the neighborhoods near Sobriety Through Outpatient (STOP) (Zip Code 19132), Project H.O.M.E.—Rowan Homes (Zip Code 19121), and Asociación de Puertorriqueños en Marcha (APM) (Zip Code 19140). James Burns will lead STOP projects. Tony Award-winning spoken word artist Black Ice will collaborate with James Burns with poetry workshops. Betsy Casanas will lead APM projects. The artists team of Keir Johnston, Collette Fu, Claes Nina “Lyrispect” Ball, and Peri “Vizion” DiVirgillio will lead Project H.O.M.E. Rowan Homes. A major project about suicide prevention called Moving Towards the Light has started. Another project about Faith and Healing is about to begin with individuals from the Yoruba, Buddhist, Christian, and Jewish communities working with artists Joe Brenman, Henry Bermudez, and Josh Smith. Finally two other projects about immigration and children/trauma and resilience will begin later in 2011 and 2012.

Art, Personal Recovery, and Community Recovery

To evaluate what the experience of working on a recovery-themed mural meant to those who helped create the mural, one of the authors (W.W.) interviewed a number of the volunteers (persons in recovery and staff from participating service organizations) who worked on the recovery murals. Their voices suggest the profound and positive nature of these experiences.

Working on the mural has been the most positive part of my treatment experience.

There has been so much destruction in my life. This was an act of creation. It feels so good to look at the mural and know I was a part of making it.

What was great was everyone’s involvement through the mural with people in the neighborhood and larger community. People who had not been involved in other program activities got very involved in the mural project. Art reaches people in a way that none of our other treatment activities can.

When you first get in recovery, there is so much craziness and so much of a vacuum to fill. Work on the mural helped fill that vacuum for me, and that’s why I have continued to volunteer with the Mural Arts Project.

The fellowship with everyone [who worked on the mural] was fabulous. We started out to create a mural and ended up creating a real community of people in recovery. We didn’t have that before the mural project.

Just to be able to do something positive was such an important part of my recovery.

Working with the Mural Arts Program is about service, fun and friendships, but it is also about finding hidden talents and elevating your sense of what is possible in your life. Volunteering to work on various mural projects helped give me a new identity and a new vision of what was possible for me. I now have my health and I have my kids back and I have people in my life who matter.

Addiction is so isolating....Many of us who helped create the mural have gotten into other community projects, but the mural was the beginning for a lot of us.

I just never realized what potential I had and I never felt I belonged before my work with Mural Arts. We've created some beautiful art, but we've also helped create some beautiful people.

I walk by the mural all the time and am in awe of its beauty. It still means a lot to me to know I had a hand in creating that.

My work with the mural was an important part of my early recovery. It was a time I could focus on something other than my problems—on something other than myself. The whole thing helped fill the void that drugs once filled for me.

That was a very special project. They involved us. They listened to us. They respected us. They told us we could do anything—that everything was possible for us.

Philadelphia, through its Mural Arts Program, is discovering the power of art as an expression of community resilience and a vehicle of personal and community healing. In images that honor the past, freeze present moments, and excite future possibilities, Philadelphia is celebrating the resilience and character of its people and of the City itself. The murals that fill the city of Philadelphia are artifacts of a process of community resilience and recovery.

For more information about the Philadelphia Mural Arts Program and how it could be replicated in other cities, contact Jane Golden Heriza at jane.golden@muralarts.org.

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