

Philadelphia's Mural Arts Program Proves

Walls
Can
Talk

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1. Artist: Meg Fish Saligman

2. Artist: Sydney Goodman

3. Artist: Jane Golden and Peter Pagast



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To many people, walls symbolize barriers. But to Jane Golden, walls are gateways to greater opportunities. As the director of Philadelphia's Mural Arts Program, Golden sees art as a vehicle for social change and puts her murals where her mouth is. MAP doesn't look for any blank wall; instead, it targets graffiti-covered surfaces. "Mural painting is about the reclamation of space and turning a blighted area into something usable and beautiful," Golden explains. "My job is to rechannel that negative energy into something positive."



Catherine Fredman writes about personal finance, management strategy and adventure travel. She's especially proud of co-authoring best-selling business books with Intel Chairman Andy Grove and Dell Computer CEO Michael Dell, as well as surviving survival school in southwest Utah, where the native New Yorker learned to catch fish with her bare hands and build a fire without matches.

Walls Can Talk, continued



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1. Artist: David Sanner

2. Artist: Diane Keller

3. Artist: Jane Golden

Philadelphia's groundbreaking program was born 20 years ago in response to a city-wide graffiti crisis. Teenage graffiti painters received amnesty from prosecution in return for signing "The Pledge," a promise to give up graffiti and work at volunteer jobs such as cleaning and preparing walls for repainting. Some of the newly blank surfaces were slated to become murals, and neighborhood kids were encouraged to help paint them.

Enter Jane Golden, who was hired to coordinate a six-week summer youth program. After graduating from Stanford University with a B.A. in art and a minor in political science, Golden had spent seven years working for the Los Angeles Citywide Mural Project and organizing a nonprofit

group of independent mural artists who worked with at-risk kids. Murals had always intrigued her. "They are able to break down barriers about where art should and should not be," she says.

One place no one ever thought art could be was the Spring Garden Street Bridge in West Philadelphia, a busy thoroughfare with six-foot-high corrugated metal walls that were literally plastered with graffiti. As a tryout for a full-time position, Golden was asked to repaint it as a mural—in time for a Labor Day dedication three weeks later.

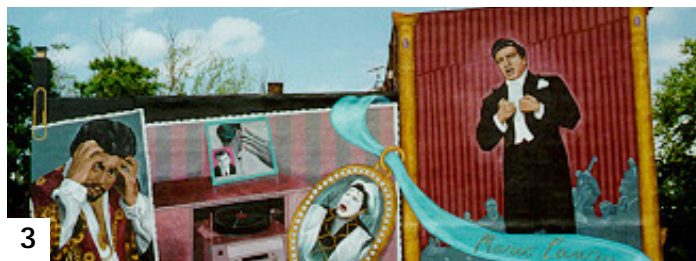
Golden rounded up teams of neighborhood kids—"the total number must have been around 100," she

recalls in *Philadelphia Murals and the Stories They Tell*, a chronicle of the Mural Arts Program. In a giant color-by-numbers process, she sketched the design and the kids slapped in the paint, all in steamy August heat that caused the paint to sizzle as it touched the metal sheets. Nobody could call the results sophisticated, but Golden and the kids had a great time—and the neighborhood loved it. "I remember people pulling over and stopping traffic on the bridge, beeping and waving, and the kids taking bows. Really, it wasn't about art, it was about the fact that kids were doing something productive for their community."

Today, there are more than 2,300 murals enhancing and encouraging the city's neighborhoods. Some celebrate famous Philadelphians such as basketball star Dr. J., Marian Anderson, Paul Robeson and Jackie Robinson; others pay tribute to local community heroes and neighborhood kids. Many depict dreamy landscapes, lush gardens and splashing waterfalls; a number highlight an allegorical theme or aim to spark discussion around a particular idea.

A typical mural is born out of a collaboration between a neighborhood and a sponsor. Don Gensler, who has painted seven murals since joining MAP in 2001, explains how the mural he's presently working on came to life. The project centers around truancy in the school systems. Although the MAP budget is often bolstered by neighborhood, foundation, corporate or even individual sponsors, the funding for this project comes entirely from the city Department of Human Services.

Walls Can Talk, continued



1. Artist: David McShane

2. Artist: Jane Degenhardt-Kutzer

3. Artist: Diane Keller

"How do you deal with such a broad-reaching topic in a visually compelling way?" Gensler recalls wondering. First, he immersed himself in the issue of truancy. He went to community meetings, interviewed police officers, listened to courtroom cases, talked with judges about how they made their decisions and had roundtable discussions with countless kids about why they go AWOL. He learned that although truancy has many roots, it has recognizable results. "Truancy really leads to delinquency," he says. "If you are a truant, something else is going on and may get worse."

Gensler asked kids to create prints depicting where they wanted to go in their lives and what was blocking them from achieving it. That became

the basis of his design. "I used those symbols in a screen across the whole wall. Breaking through the screen are photographic images of some of the actual kids who were involved in the roundtable discussions."

Some muralists paint the design directly on the wall. Like a growing number of artists, Gensler creates the design on his computer, then enlarges it to scale and projects it onto a special acrylic cloth. The cloth is thin enough that Gensler can bring the 34'x 128' mural to a classroom but only unroll a 5'x 5' section at a time. "Once everything is drawn on the cloth, I figure out what areas a community—assuming people have zero experience—can paint," he explains. "I'll set up an area that's

prepared in a paint-by-number fashion. All the colors are premixed within an hour or two, people can step back and feel they've done something, without jeopardizing the quality of the mural." When the painting is completed, Gensler applies a glue-like gel to the back of the cloth and pastes the cloth onto the wall, which has been smoothed and primed. The gel gets absorbed and the cloth bonds to the wall.

Gensler began researching truancy in January of this year; the mural will go up on the wall of a building at 2110 Market Street in October. In addition to the many groups who participated in nurturing and developing the idea, Gensler hopes the mural's message will reach out to an even larger audience. "The fact that we're doing this mural just as you're entering the Financial District says that truancy is everyone's problem. It can't be ignored. Because if we ignore it, we'll have greater and greater problems down the road."

That murals have an effect on people and communities has been proven again and again. Golden likes to talk about how the mural of Jackie Robinson sliding into home plate is as much of an instigator of social change as the man it honors. The vacant lot next to the mural, once clogged with weeds and debris, is now clean, green and revitalized with a daycare center for kids and an African market in front of its fence. Golden recounts, "The woman who owns the market, Miss Marilyn Porter, told me that every day that she comes out of her house and sees Jackie Robinson, it's a day she sees her potential."

Walls Can Talk, continued



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1. Artist: Arturo Ho, Giz, N. Phung, H. Tran

2. Artist: Ana Uribe

3. Artist: Meg Fish Saligman



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When artist Ana Uribe, who has painted 19 murals for MAP, painted “Tropical Landscape with Waterfall” five years ago, the area was dense with trash. “I used to be amazed by how much trash there was,” recalls Uribe. “It’s so different now. There are trees, there is grass, everybody looks a lot happier.”

Golden believes that having a work of art on the corner makes people feel better about their neighborhood. But MAP does more than promote good feelings. When people from MAP and a neighborhood association agree to create a mural, MAP calls on other city agencies to pitch in. “We get the Streets Department to remove the trash, another department to cut the weeds and plant grass, another department to put up a fence,”

explains Golden. Often Philadelphia Green, an offshoot of the Pennsylvania Horticultural Society, will provide resources for a community garden. The transformation happens so quickly that, Golden says with a laugh, “People say it’s like magic.”

MAP now spreads its magic in a variety of ways. More than 1,100 youth—from age 9 through 18—participate in art education and delinquency prevention programs every year. (In fact, Rocco Albano, a former graffiti writer, is now one of the program’s most celebrated muralists.) Through its Healing Walls project, MAP works with men in prison to create murals to apologize to the communities where they committed their crimes and break the cycle of violence.

“When I think about the kids in our programs, they’re growing up in areas that look like war zones. Many of the kids have failure etched on their foreheads,” says Golden. “When you introduce beauty and begin cleaning up lots and removing abandoned cars and graffiti, it’s huge. It makes people feel that they have a voice, that they can be part of the system of change, that there’s potential, that redemption can be possible. For so long, they have felt beleaguered and unempowered. To offer them some unexpected beauty ends up being very uplifting.”

Guided tours of many of the murals are held weekly from April through October. For information, contact the Mural Arts Program at www.muralarts.org or call 215-685-0754.