

The Urban Art Trail

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The Joy is in the Journey of a thousand little steps in a day. It is in the joy of discovering what words cannot express. It is on the road, on the way. Walk Slowly. Valerie J. Hasson, 1997. (Initial poem from the Urban Art Trail)

Truly the "Joy is in the Journey" that six San Diego Calligraphers were invited to take in November of 1998. The Urban Art Trail, a Neighborhood Art project, was begun in mid 1998 by Professor Candice Lopez, head of the Graphic Arts department of San Diego City College, and her husband Rafael Lopez, an internationally known illustrator.

The Trail was begun as an attempt to raise community pride in the downtown San Diego area, where graffiti, gang activity, and drug dealing had come to be accepted as normal.

After an assignment in which Candice had directed her students to do research at the Library, and they had returned saying they were unable to complete the research because they were afraid to go downtown, she decided that something had to be done. Candice formed the first "Neighborhood Watch" program in the downtown area, and then concentrated her efforts to making the area in which she and Rafael call their home into something beautiful and inspiring.

Taking her queue from similar beautification projects begun in downtown areas of Philadelphia and Boston, Candice put her own personal touch in organizing hundreds of artists, business owners, and volunteers to donate their time, money, materials and effort to take back the neighborhood.

"A mighty flame followeth a tiny spark." Dante

Being a teacher of type design, Candice wanted to convey the power of words to the community by making sidewalk poetry a major component of the Trail. She called an acquaintance from the AIGA, San Diego calligrapher Nancy Stutman. Nancy promptly organized a group of local lettering artists to design, and execute, permanent calligraphy on the downtown sidewalks.

"Words form the thread on which we string our experiences."

But before the calligraphers could begin, Candice had to make sure that the Urban Art Trail had a firm foundation of City and community support. Candice and Rafael began by approaching the local power and telephone companies to get permission to remove the graffiti from their transformer boxes and replace it with colorful artwork. After initially being turned down, they returned with full color mock-ups and were granted permission to proceed. Rafael then painted the first test box with his own design.

These transformer boxes were an important first step in the Trail's progress for two reasons: first, the graffiti artists and "taggers" will respect art and leave it alone; and second, these boxes were used as the local drug dealers' "offices". By the community having formed a Neighborhood Watch, the artwork in effect "marked the territory" for the community... the dealers found it easier to go somewhere else.

"One man can make a difference, and everyone should try"

John Fitzgerald Kennedy

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Candice then organized a juried art competition for students of three local colleges. Over one hundred designs were submitted, and 70 were chosen to be applied to transformer boxes and trashcans along the 11 block Trail. In addition, six local professional illustrators volunteered to design and paint boxes as well.

The first event was organized. A day was chosen, funds were raised, and supplies were purchased. Students and professionals as well as local volunteers then appeared and began to transform the city venue into something magical. Local news covered the event, articles were written in the local newspapers and the city officials were happy.

"In Art, as in love, instinct is enough." *Anatole France*

After this first successful event, a second phase was planned. This next organized event would include planter mosaics, a group mural project, and two test pieces of our calligraphy. Prior to the event, Nancy had asked Tom Seibert and myself to meet with the product representative for a product called Relay. This product is a resin, which when mixed with water, cement, and acrylic pigments, forms a permanent bond with concrete.

When the event day arrived, Tom and I arrived to a hotbed of activity. People were up on scaffolding painting a 45-foot mural, which Rafael had designed. People were breaking up donated ceramic tiles and choosing "found objects" in order to begin their planter mosaics. And Tom and I began the testing of our designs and materials.

"The object of art is to give life shape" *Jean Anouilh*

One of the stipulations that Nancy had made (after discussion with Tom) was that we would not be able to complete the required number of poems and quotes (approximately 45) without the aid of a machine called a plotter. This machine is similar to a blueprint machine, but uses a blade to cut vinyl "stencils" up to two feet wide. Tom would test his design using the stencil, and I would test mine by painting directly onto the concrete with a brush.

Our testing was then to be reviewed by the city officials for approval to determine whether we would be able to continue. The officials liked what they saw. Candice then purchased a plotter for Tom, raised the funds to cover it later, and set us on our way.

It was time for organization now, and Nancy rallied the troops. She had formed a group of six that possessed the talent necessary to accomplish the task. Included were Nancy Stutman, Tom Seibert, Donna Young, Lisabet Wilson, Francie Droll, and myself, Randy Hasson. Within this group were individuals who were able to scan and process the artwork through Adobe Photoshop (Francie, Donna and Tom) and then copy or email it to Tom so that he could feed the information to the plotter. All of the artwork was completed at the drawing table, which enabled all of us to contribute our designs to the project.

Nancy then organized a meeting in which we walked the grounds, saw the areas where the artwork would be placed, and scheduled a date to begin.

" You must do the thing you think you cannot do." *Eleanor Roosevelt*

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Candice had given a class assignment that her students would each work with a calligrapher and then later write a report on the experience. We came with about 15 prepared stencils, and with the help of the student volunteers, set to work in painting the backgrounds for our lettering.

On that first day, we all were learning the process, so there was a lot of running around over an 11-block area. Tom's wife Robyn came, and contributed her expertise by painting backgrounds in faux marble for 2 of Tom's pieces, as well as helping with blended backgrounds on others. At the end of the first day, we had approximately 10 sites either done or in progress.

The next day, the City officials had toured the area, and determined that some of our backgrounds were too bright for their liking, and as a result, some had to be reworked. In spite of this, our group managed to complete about 15 pieces this first weekend. During this weekend, we were constantly encouraged by passerby and interested parties who were happy that their community was in the process of being transformed. Many of them had never seen "beautiful letters" like this before, and were encouraged by the sentiments expressed and the quotes chosen.

"Sometimes I've believed as many as six impossible things by breakfast." *Lewis Carroll*

A second day was scheduled to complete as many of the remaining quotes as possible. Things went more smoothly this time, because we had made most of our mistakes the first weekend. We also were asked to either go with only very neutral backgrounds, or none at all. This day we completed about 15 additional designs, and completed the backgrounds that we were unable to complete the first time. Again, the community reaction was appreciative. It was fun to be working, and have someone unknowingly compliment you on a piece you did 4 blocks away. This happened to all of us at different times during our involvement.

"You must be the change you wish to see in the world." *Ghandi*

At this point, for all of us, there have been many rewarding experiences in working with this project. Our group of calligraphers formed a bond; we learned from and encouraged one another. We met two incredible people with the drive and determination to see a project of this magnitude through. But perhaps more than any other thing, it is the knowledge that we were taking part in a project that was transforming attitudes, and even lives.

On the day that the planter mosaics were being completed, one group was using pennies as their "found" objects. They were placing the pennies all face up on one side of the tree ring, and all face down on the other. As they were working, a group of locals were watching them and talking to them. This group began to tease them, saying they were going to come back later and "steal the pennies to buy some crack". After the rest of the group had left, one homeless man stayed behind. He reached into the pocket of his jeans and pulled out three pennies, saying, "I really like what you are doing, and I'd like to donate these to your art". The group was touched by his gesture, and took his three pennies and placed them on the face down side...only they place his three pennies face up so that he would always know which were his. Upon hearing this story, my wife Valerie wrote a poem called "One man's change", which was approved by the city officials and now is a permanent part of the trail next to the planter.

At the end of that same day, Rafael was trying to finish cleaning up the lines on his mural design. They had rented a hydraulic lift at \$200 per day, and he was still working at 10 o'clock that night. A passerby in a car stopped and asked why they were there so late, and Candice told him they could only afford one day for the lift; they had to return it the next day. He left and came back 5 minutes

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later with \$200 he had just withdrawn from an ATM machine so that they could continue the next day.

"The Joy is in the Journey"

One of the people helping Rafael complete the mural was a former gang-member and graffiti artist from East Los Angeles. His parents decided to move from L.A. to San Diego because they feared if they didn't he would be dead in a year. He met Rafael, and began working with him at every opportunity. He has now become an integral part of the project and, with Rafael's help, has formed his own mural painting business. He has enrolled in Candice's design program at San Diego City College as well.

Another individual became interested in the project while he was in a drug rehabilitation facility in the downtown area. His life at that point had no direction, but he became interested in the project and came to volunteer for every phase. He began doing art at his rehab center all day long. Soon, he went back for his high school equivalency test, and consequently was released from the program. He is now currently enrolled in Candice's graphic arts program as well.

"The ancestors remind us, despite the history of pain, we are a going-on people who will rise again." -Maya Angelou

And the trail continues.

The City of San Diego has issued a special proclamation declaring an Urban Art Trail day; the AIGA has awarded Candice the Gold Award (their highest award to give); The Center City Development Corporation (responsible for approving the project) has given Candice the Director's award; and San Diego's Historic Gaslamp Association has given their award to the trail: the first time it has ever been awarded to a non-architectural project. The Trail is now included in the city guide for tourism.

New projects are planned for the future: A children's art walk to illustrate different stages of art in history using dogs as examples; a fine art trail where local fine artists donate their talents to beautify another section...

"A journey of a thousand miles begins with a single step."

Chinese Proverb

And how privileged we were to be able to work with one who was willing to take that first step.

"One Man's Change"

The homeless people stood around

and watched them lay the pennies down

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They laughed and said that they'd be back

to steal those pennies to buy crack.

But one man chose to stay behind

and reached into his jeans to find

3 pennies that had small to give

but he found them a way to live.

He said, "I'd like to be a part

of what you're making with your art"

So while the others' heads are down,

this one man's change is clearly found.

1999-Valerie J. Hasson for the Urban Art Trail