

MURAL CAPITAL

Taking pride in River City

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Locals who are disappointed when they read about Winnipeg being the murder capital, the mosquito capital, or the auto theft capital have a new title they can be proud of, not dread.

Tom Ethans believes Winnipeg is becoming the mural capital of Canada.

Take a look around River City and it's easy to see what he's getting at. Artists have been climbing scaffolding all over town in recent years, painting murals on commercial buildings and other large walls.

"I think it's a great program," said Ethans, executive director of Take Pride Winnipeg, which has commissioned many of the estimated 450 murals the city boasts. "It certainly enhances a neighbourhood and it brings out our history.

"This year we had over 26 businesses who came to us. We've already got 11 on tap for next year."

Take Pride began doing murals in 1994, mostly to brighten up graffiti-laden underpasses, completing about 20 by 1997. But the pace has picked up since 1998, as Take Pride has commissioned about 125 murals in more visual areas, such as businesses, schools and churches.

Normally, Take Pride and a business owner will split the costs of a mural, but neighbourhood associations, including West End BIZ, Selkirk Avenue BIZ, Downtown BIZ, Neighbourhoods Alive, and Centre Venture have also commissioned works.

Take Pride has about 18 artists who it puts to work, while students are also hired to assist with larger jobs. Take Pride's largest projects this year included murals at Yellowquill College on Portage Avenue, featuring a history of horse racing at Assiniboia Downs, and at Higgins Avenue and Main Street.

"I've got the nicest mural in the city," proclaimed Bruce Kondratuk, who owns the building on Higgins where he runs his engineering business.

"When they tore the New Brunswick hotel down, I had this huge wall," Kondratuk said. "I always liked the mural on the Hydro building by Polo Park, so I started looking around and talking to some artists."

What Kondratuk learned was it's very



expensive to have the work done.

"Then I got a call from Centre Venture asking if I would be interested in participating with a mural, and I said 'absolutely,'" he recalled. "Then we decided developing a concept, which was the developing of the city of Winnipeg."

The result was a blend of history and modern-day Winnipeg scenes.

"I definitely wanted the old city hall in there," said Kondratuk, 60. "My dad Steve and Steve Juba were very good friends. So I said, 'This is for you, Dad.'"

Kondratuk has owned the building for 10

years, almost totally restoring its interior. He has down-sized his operation to work as an independent engineer and doesn't need the space, so he recently put it up for sale.

"But now that the mural is on there, I'd like to be able to keep it," Kondratuk said with a chuckle.

Everybody's a critic

And artists don't mind a bit

From panhandlers to noted city officials, mural artists are accustomed to having their work critiqued by anyone who happens to stroll by while they're working.

"Doing the one at Main (Street) and Higgins (Avenue) was interesting.

"We got a lot of comments from people and the locals from the area," artist Jennifer Johnson Pollock said with a grin.

"A few of the locals wanted a ride on the hydraulic lift," added her company partner Mandy van Leeuwen with a chuckle.

Then there was the guy who offered to clean Johnson Pollock's hands with the gas he had in a container in his pocket.

"It's the forum of public opinion and that's one of the best perks of doing this work," said Charlie Johnston, who helped Johnson Pollock and van Leeuwen with the Welcome to Winnipeg mural at Main and Higgins.

"The demographic is right across the charts.

"It can be the homeless street person whose opinion is just as valid as the rich upper class."

Last summer a little old lady approached Johnston on Portage Avenue as he painted.

"She didn't look like she had very much, but she gave me a little bag

and said, 'you go get yourself some lunch,'" Johnston recalled.

The bag contained three dollars and 62 cents.

Not wanting to insult the woman, Johnston gratefully accepted.

"Then she spent an hour telling me the story of her life," he said.

Johnston recalled one unfavourable review when he painted the Donovan Bailey mural at Athletes Wear on Market Avenue in 1999. "One guy yelled up at me, 'Get that Donovan Bailey off of there! The guy is a bum!'" he said with a laugh.

-Lunney



Photos JOHN WOODS Sun

Mandy van Leeuwen (left) and Jennifer Johnson Pollock of Utopian Art Design work on a mural at the corner of Wall and Sargent.