A quarterly publication of the National Grange
Vol. 6, Issue 1 | June 2022

Good DAY!™

Philanthropy in the Modern Age

Although always a part of American culture, the way people give - and who we give to - has changed drastically over the past few decades. From major philanthropy to individual donations, how have we shifted our interests, and what comes next?

Community murals unite and inspire hometowns

By Elody Gyekis
Artist, Community Artist, Teacher

"Pride in the Past. Love of Place. Hope for the future."

These words dance across the top of my community mural in my one-stoplight rural hometown in Central PA. This is the kind of town where Amish buggies pass big rigs in the narrow street, where immigrant families work on large farms and roadside stands pop up with home-grown vegetables all summer long. This is the kind of town where everyone knows everybody else, and neighbors look out for you and your families. But this is also the kind of town that has shrunk over the years, as out-migration has led young adults out of rural America into the suburbs and cities.

Despite a recent revitalization that has endowed Millheim with a microbrewery, a coffeeshop, and an art gallery and other small businesses, the 2010 census showed a population of just around 900 residents.

I have done over a dozen mural projects across Pennsylvania and other states, and each one has its own unique flavor, reflecting the identity of that specific place. But that basic sentiment is expressed in all of them.

Millheim, Pennsylvania is a small town of about 900 residents.

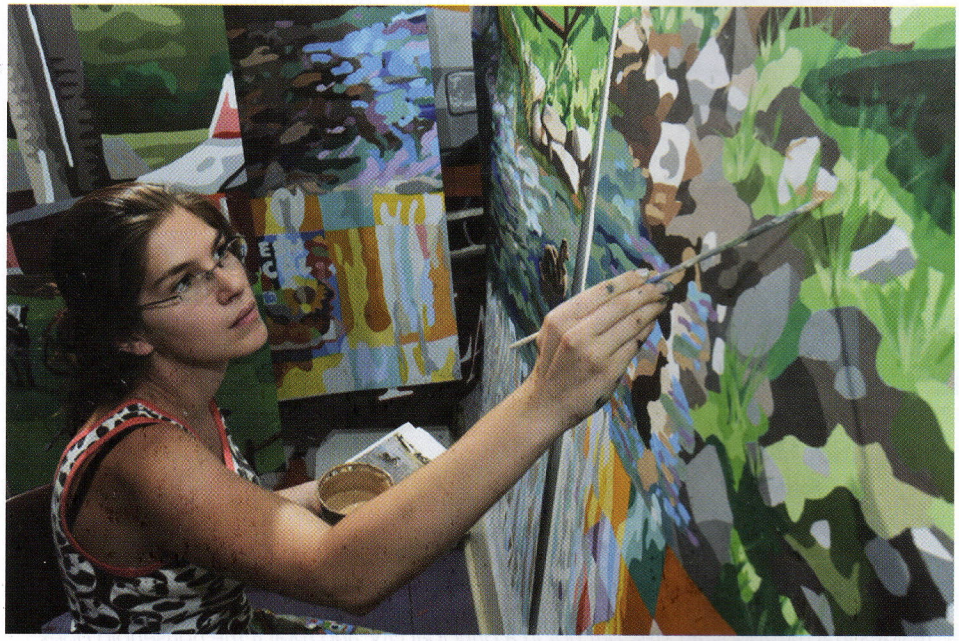
Photo by Elody Gyekis

For those of us who are lucky enough to be connected to a place, whether it is a rural town or an urban neighborhood, whether we have lived in that place for generations or a few years, we all love "our places" with this mixture of pride and love and hope.

Pride in the Past: We all need to have pride in the heritage and history of a place. This is possible even while acknowledging when that history is far from perfect. We need to honor the experiences, accomplishments, and memories of those that came before us. We need to listen to the stories of our elders who remember, or remember those who remember, what came before.

Love of Place: Places, like people, need to be loved to stay alive, to continue to thrive. If we forget to actively love a place, it begins to crumble and fall apart. Many communities have suffered economic blows as times change, industry changes, and small businesses struggle to survive. It takes love and energy and creativity to change with the times and infuse an old place with new life.

Hope for the Future: To have hope for the future often means acknowledging what is wrong, what you want to see change. To survive unwanted change, a community has



Gyekis works on adding detail to a community mural before its final placement.

Photo provided

to have a vision for what could be, and faith that the vision is possible.

A mural is a bold, public, visual representation of a story. Putting our stories up on walls for all to see is a practice that has existed for thousands of years, through cave paintings, frescos, and murals. It helps to express what is important to a community. Today, murals often happen in places that have come to a crossroads and needs to reclaim and share its own story. There is not a wealth of literature that measures the impact of murals, but there are a few studies.

A 2003 study by UPenn's Social Impact of the Arts Project looked at the effects of mural projects in Philadelphia. The results showed that there were objective benefits like increased values of adjacent properties and reduced crime rates.

These benefits may not be caused by the murals themselves or may have more to do with the community that cared enough to mobilize and create it, showing that this is a space that is cared for and loved. Making the project happen means connecting communities, which then inspires further projects and further connections. Communities are stronger and more resilient when they are connected to one another and support each other.

Struggling rural towns and urban neighborhoods can have much in common. Many small towns across America are turning to mural projects to kick start revitalization, express identity, to show pride and love, and to bring the community together in a unifying project. It also makes visitors feel attracted to and interested in the place. These kinds of projects can build momentum for tourism, local business, attracting new residents, and inspiring further projects.

I became involved with community art as a hopeful and idealistic 18-year-old. I was looking for meaningful summer work the summer between my freshman and sophomore years as a student at Penn State University. I just happened to see a flier in the library seeking an artist to be an intern to lead a community mural project in Harrisburg. I had no mural experience, but I was a skilled painter, and was awarded the internship based on my portfolio and interview.

Gyekis' hometown mural in Millheim, Pennsylvania adorns the side of the local microbrewery and cafe. *Photo by Elody Gyekis*

That summer changed my life. I was a teenaged white girl from rural Pennsylvania, and suddenly I was living and working in the inner-city neighborhood of Allison Hill, Harrisburg.

Allison Hill is the kind of neighborhood where nearby suburbanites make sure to lock their car doors if they must drive through it, and I stuck out like a sore thumb.

But I grew to love it and ended up working on projects there for two years. Everything about that time was challenging and interesting and full of warmth and humanity and surprises. The murals that we created celebrated the struggles and triumphs of the residents who were making the best of things despite a lack of infrastructure, opportunity, and amenities.

The theme we chose for the first mural was "Live the Conversation" and depicted a tree full of the faces of people in the neighborhood, leaders that were dedicating themselves to improving their community.

My contribution was insignificant compared to theirs, but I helped bring everyone together to talk about and celebrate what was good, and to make one small corner more beautiful, transformed from neglected to loved.

That was the summer that I learned that my artistic skills could actually be put to use in a way that did good in the world. At the time, I loved making art, but part of me felt that my career was selfish and indulgent. I no longer think that way about my fine artwork, but there is something tangibly different about community art and its greater impact.

I could see it in the pride that was expressed in the project by so many of the people who helped, the way we all worked together to transform an abandoned lot that was gathering litter into a small park with grass and gardens and benches, next to a mural. During that time, I worked with hundreds of people; I worked with daycare centers, senior centers, church groups, schools, juvenile delinquents, and the Dauphin County Work Release system. The inmates there could get community service hours if they worked with me.

I remember one day, late in my first summer there, I was working side-by-side

with one of my regulars, an inmate from the work release system. He was older and treated me in a fatherly way, having had teenage daughters himself. He was the kind of person that, despite having almost no money of his own, would hear me complain about being hungry and then use his break to spend his change on some potato chips from the corner store and then give them to me.

It was towards the end of the project, and we could see that the mural panels were almost finished. He turned to me and said something like "this will be up by the time I get out. I can't wait to bring my daughter down to see the mural and show her what I did."

Every project I do is filled with moments like this, and that is what keeps me going. That summer was 17 years ago. Each project I do is so different, but they all share these moments of meaning. It is humbling to be a part of.

Currently, I am in the process of helping another rural Pennsylvania town, Middleburg, get a mural project going to kick start revitalization of the town. I am also halfway through facilitating a mural in Phoenix, Arizona that is all about celebrating identity diversity and building mental health awareness. I have two LGBTQ young adult interns that I am training to lead the project on the ground, as I can only be on site occasionally.

It has been such a joy watching them gain the confidence to lead this project. That is the other thing that keeps me going: each project trains and empowers others to take on this kind of work and carry it forward to the next generation.

Gyekis, center, works alongside students on the "Dreams Take Flight" community mural in State College, Pennsylvania.

Photo provided

Not all public art is community art. **Public art** can be made by anyone and put anywhere so people can access it. **Community art** has to reflect the place where it exists and be meaningful to the people who will see it every day.

When I direct a mural project, it is all about maximizing community engagement at every step of the way. Making sure that the voices and vision of a place and its people are represented in the design. This process starts with a lot of conversations where I listen for the themes that come up over and over again with many community members. Those themes then guide the design.

The mural itself is designed digitally, and then I turn the entire mural into a giant paint-by-number project, painted on panels that are later glued up on the designated wall like outdoor wallpapering. In this way, hundreds of community members can help to paint the mural, people of all ages and skill levels can work together and have pride in making something beautiful and meaningful with their own hands.

Coming together to create a community mural makes us talk about what we love about a place, and sharing that love aloud with others reinforces it. It reminds us to be grateful, and to cherish and protect those things. To tell our stories about history, heritage, and people. To acknowledge what needs to change. To build a vision looking towards the future.

The Allison Hill mural brought the community together in the creation and unveiling of the project.

Photo provided

Mural brings new life to Oregon Grange and community

By Suzy Ramm
Senior Communication Fellow
Oregon State Grange Bulletin Editor

A local student (right) paints the sand while, up on the ladder, artist and Grange President Eric Sappington works on the sunrise. *Photo provided*

Located at the corner of the Trask River Road and 3rd Street in the small dairy town of Tillamook on the Oregon coast, Fairview Grange #273's Hall has a new bright eye-catching mural – 'A Gathering at the Grange.'

"The mural is for the community, for this neighborhood, as well as to bring the Grange into more of a cultural center" Eric Sappington, President of Fairview Grange and a local artist, musician and teacher explained.

"The mural focuses on the farms, the children, the music, and the community," Sappington said. "We wanted to keep it simple and represent our community. The silhouettes can be anybody, everyone can gravitate towards one or two of those things. I wanted it to be something people could see and relate to."

From one end to the other the 40-foot wide by 15-foot high mural, the many views of Tillamook are represented. It starts on one end with a painting of a lighthouse representing Cape Meares Lighthouse, and the other end a misty sunrise over the hills.

"I have included aspects of our community, with the lighthouse, the ocean, the trees, as well as the hillsides, the figures of our community: the loggers, musicians, the artists, the children, the farmers, as well as some wildlife. I envisioned this as if we were standing here looking through the Grange," said Sappington.

The mural was a cooperative project between the Grange, the Oregon Coast Children's Theatre's Foundation, which funded the project, and members of the community. "We had local high school students working on it," Sappington said, "and community members helped out."

The painting began in August 2021 with volunteers helping a couple of hours, two nights a week, and artist Larry Adrian, Artistic Director for the Oregon Coast Children's Theater (OCCT) and other volunteers working on the weekends.

The project took about eight weeks to complete. "The neighborhood has been really excited about it because they say it really brightens their day," Sappington said.

The mural was one of several projects completed at the Hall last summer and into the fall as volunteers, students, theater staff, Grange members and family worked on renovations. With those renovations finished, OCCT will make their new administration office at the Grange Hall in the old Box Office. The over 100-year-old building received fresh coats of paint inside and out, and repairs to doors, windows and the front area of the building. Other repairs continued through the winter and into spring of 2022. Tillamook Rotary is donating a new wheelchair ramp for the building, and many other projects and events are planned for this historic building with a long history for the region.

"Granges historically have been about agriculture and community," Grange President Sappington said. "They were about farmers getting together and sharing with the community."

The Fairview Grange, the oldest Grange in Tillamook County, was chartered in 1895, with forty-three members. It was the 273rd Grange to be organized in Oregon. The Grange Hall was built in 1916, at a cost of $2,000, and was then considered the finest Grange Hall in the state.

Built before the invention of microphones, amps and speakers, the Grange Hall was engineered to be

"A Gathering at the Grange" the recently finished mural on Fairview Grange, brightens the day of their neighbors as they pass by.

Photo by Suzy Ramm

acoustically dynamic, allowing speeches and musical presentations to project without a sound system. Since then, the Grange Hall has been extensively used for dances, concerts, weddings, markets, and other public gatherings.

Over the years, the building became in need of extensive repair, as membership dipped. In 2011, the Oregon State Grange took possession of the Hall when the Grange went dormant. "The Hall was going to get demolished eight years ago until 10 strong members stepped up to save it," Sappington said. In 2013, the Grange was reorganized and the Hall saved, now being shared with the theatre company.

OCCT focuses on education in both theatre and fine arts. "We build and fund public works of art," Adrian said. "Most schools in Tillamook County have a mural that was done by us."

As a part of their partnership and renovations to the Fairview Grange, OCCT for the Arts Foundation and supporters commissioned Sappington to design and oversee the installation of the mural on the side of the building.

The theatre company will be holding artist showcases, open mic nights, and theatrical events at the Hall. "Our eventual goal is to use the Grange auditorium to do live theatre performances," Adrian said. And like many Grange Halls, it will be open for events such as birthday parties and weddings, in addition to the Grange's meetings.