

Healing through Art In Billings, Montana - Know Your Colors!

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In Billings, Montana, an underpass used daily by 17,000 vehicles, joggers, cyclists and others got a facelift. An elk, a black bear, a mother grizzly and her two cubs, a moose, an almost life sized bison family, a rattlesnake, western meadowlark and other Western Plains denizens look ready to walk off the walls from a mural that now decorates more than 2000-square-feet of formerly drab, grey concrete.

Elyssa Leininger, a professional artist from Billings, completed the model sized mural to fit the underpass in July 2020. The model was filled with sunrises and wildlife paintings to soothe and uplift her community, and would serve to heal some of the hurt caused by the worldwide pandemic.

Elyssa began painting the full-scale mural in August with the help of volunteers. Every day in August, after volunteers left, the youthful artist outlined large forms and scenery in chalk. Most days she came at 9 a.m. and left when the sun went down. The following morning she guided volunteers while they painted in chalk-defined large areas and background colors. These became the sky, the Rims, the Yellowstone River, large-bodied animals and the Plains.

Features and detailed painting were all done by the artist, who spent over 100 days in heat and cold until she finished her work in November. It seemed like prayers were answered, when after a very cold, snowy week, the temperature climbed and anti-graffiti coating could be rolled on by Elyssa's parents, professional painters.

Support from Women's Federation for World Peace (WFWP) was crucial to the mural's success. We helped raise money for the project, visited the site and encouraged the artist, volunteered time, shared pictures of the mural in progress with others and helped in all phases until it was completed. Many WFWP members live on Billings South Side, and we wanted to help the mural succeed!

Then on January 16, 2020 at a live and virtual WFWP gathering, Elyssa was invited to share about the mural and the healing effects colors have on the body. With a background in Art and Psychology, she explained that emotional healing for viewers could come about through using bright, shining sunrises, vivid colors, wildlife and the dramatic Rims formation which rings the City of Billings.

She said, "I used (purple) for storm clouds in the mural to create a 'tense' feeling." She explained that the

color purple causes muscles to tense, and signifies sophistication and spirituality. The artist said that color psychology was used in her paintings to "influence viewer's emotions."

In her talk, she also told WFWP members that colors affect the entire Central Nervous System (CNS). Yellow, the "strongest color," increases the heart rate and energy level! With that in mind, I noted large areas of yellow in the sunrise and in the golden-colored Rims. They convey hope and strength! Elyssa said that she chose to paint two large sunrises, one on each end of the mural, to express the wisdom that "sunshine follows the rain both in God's outdoor world and in life experiences."



Most of the colors Elyssa talked about -- yellow, orange, turquoise, pink "which decreases aggression," blue, and green -- are used extensively in her mural. However, red, "the second strongest color," is sparingly used in the mural. Color psychologists say that red may increase blood pressure, elicit anger and convey danger, she said. Red also can cause students to do worse on tests, and athletes may stress and not perform well when large patches of red exist.

Elyssa said that creating art is a way to experience healing. On a physiological level, "cortisol, the body's main stress hormone, is lessened after creating art for 45 minutes. Art also causes the mind and body to work harmoniously." Elyssa shared that the mural gave (her) a sense of community involvement, accomplishment, and belonging: some great reasons to do art!

Elyssa finished her talk by telling us that during the time she worked on the mural, she kept track of over 100 random acts of kindness she experienced from the community. People brought her homemade salsa, donuts, cold drinks, coffee, pizza, McDonalds, and other gifts. Also, the honks of car horns, people yelling "thank you" from cars, and interviews for broadcasts on the news all added to Elyssa's feeling of wellbeing. During the final days of painting, when her truck and her mother's car were broken into and vandalized, the cost of the damage was even reimbursed. Later, a kind person donated a gift box of bath products to help soothe that painful memory.

The audience was enthralled by Ms. Leininger's presentation, and many took pictures of the model mural Elyssa had worked from. Then, protected by our masks, we went down to paint beautiful, healing sunrises instructed by Elyssa. We were able to share her experience as we created our own "masterworks for healing."