

**Davis 100 Projects for Peace
Final Report - Summer 2007**

Title: A Sense of Place: A Mural of Peace

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Description & Goals

At the foothills of the Cascade Mountains, along the spine of the Snoqualmie River lays the series of small towns which compose the “Snoqualmie Valley.” Due to the sheer breadth of the Valley and the remote nature of the towns, the inhabitants rarely have opportunities to cultivate a sense of communal identity. Many of the young people living here resent the isolation of rural living and seek cultural and social activities in larger suburbs and cities. In order to help remedy the disjointedness of the Valley populace, the “Sense of Place Project” was designed to engender local pride and local leadership in the emerging generation by highlighting the unique and exciting characteristics of the Valley itself. We began the program by posing the following questions to the eleven teenage participants:

What if you woke up this morning and discovered that you could no longer leave the Snoqualmie Valley? Would you call this your community? What would you need to see change in order to survive in this place? How would you go about making those changes? What if the solutions you imagine were to begin to transform this space for the better?

Over the course of three months, participants delved into these questions through education in Valley history; conversations with local elders and political leaders; and a variety of art forms. We met with artists and speakers on Tuesdays and Saturdays from 10-2 o'clock at Miller's Community and Arts center in Carnation, WA. The project focused on creative expression as a means of empowering young people to envision and communicate their ideas about the future of the Valley and the greater world. This project was ultimately about listening to the voices of the emerging generation and taking what they imagine for the future seriously. In order to synthesize their vision, artistic director Mark Edwards and I worked with the youth to develop a mural design which encompasses our aspirations for our community. We decided to create a portable mural which will tour public events in the Snoqualmie Valley during the summer of 2008. The portable quality of the mural will enable us to maximize our audience and increase the potential for tangible change to occur through artistic discourse.

This project was sponsored by a northwest-based non-profit youth empowerment organization, The Power of Hope. Donors have thus far contributed \$1890 to support the production of the mural and we expect to receive more donations throughout the year. Local hardware and art supply stores donated paint and substantially discounted additional materials. Over fifteen local adult artists and professionals taught workshops in their fields which covered subjects ranging from ethnobotany, to landscape painting, to hip-hop culture, to creative writing, to storytelling. Although the workshop section of the project has been completed, the eleven youth participants will continue to work on the production of the mural every Saturday night until it is finished at the end of November. It is our hope that this project will set the stage for future projects of a similar nature and that the original eleven youth will act as mentors for next year's group of young leaders. In this way, the project will fuel both intergenerational and inter-youth dialogue about the future of our Valley.

Results

The greatest success of “The Sense of Place Project” is evident in the youths' chosen theme for the twelve panel portable mural: **WAKE UP!** Of all possible subjects, the young people in this group were primarily concerned with encouraging their generation to “wake up” to the problems and marvels of their communities, “wake up” to their own potential as leaders, and work for positive change. Given that the primary goal of this project was to empower youth to create their ideal community, their chosen theme could not have been more in alignment with our aspirations.

Our final mural design involves twelve 4ft. by 8ft. panels which will be set up in a circular formation with cedar posts between them. Visitors to the mural will step into the center of the circle, and the mural will surround them—creating its own separate space. The mural will detail the history of the Valley, transition into its present state, and illustrate the youths' vision for the Valley's future. In addition to this continuous design, images and written excerpts from each participant's summer journal will be collaged throughout the piece. This design enables us to feature each person's reflections while communicating our shared dream of the Valley's identity and future.

Originally our goal was to complete the mural by the end of the summer. Due to the large number of workshops we covered, the scale of our collaborated design concept, and the difficulty of synchronizing young-people's summer schedules, we were unable to meet this deadline. However, we will continue meeting every Saturday evening for the next two months, until the mural is finished. We do not consider this extended time-frame a set back however; because it will enable us to continue to build mentorship relationships with the youth during the school year, and it will further solidify their group identity.

One of the greatest challenges of this project was recruiting youth participants with a high-need for a *free* arts program. Our aim was to include teens that spanned the gamut of the Valley's cultural and economic backgrounds. As often happens in programs of this nature, our inability to cover the liability of providing transportation and the interference of our meeting schedule with youths' summer jobs, detracted from our potential outreach to individuals who could have most benefited from a free program. As a result, the majority of our students were from middle class families. These students certainly had valuable experiences in our program and important insight to offer, but they were not pushed beyond their cultural comfort zones or sufficiently exposed to the local diversity of their own generation. When we repeat this program in the future, I would like to aid this major issue by offering stipends to youth for their participation and providing transportation. This practice has long been applied by mural project coordinators in L.A. and Philadelphia, as it offers youth the opportunity to work as paid artists and it enables them to receive an arts education while covering their economic necessities.

Implications

On September 8th, the youth participants, the donors, the workshop teachers, and the local artists attended a party in celebration of the end of our summer courses. It was at this gathering that the project's implications for peace came into focus. Around candle-lit tables, a kindergarten teacher and a 17 year old brainstormed how they could motivate the school board to input recycling programs in Valley schools; a woman in her sixties inquired into the college plans of two teenagers she'd never met before that night and offered her advice; and in the background, bursts of laughter echoed out of our garage-studio as six youth began painting the mural we spent all summer designing. After three months of difficult work, our canvas filled with color and our evening brimmed with the magic of intergenerational exchange.

The most important lessons of this project were clearly revealed that night... Throughout the summer I battled my own insecurities as I struggled against the tide of the project's natural evolution and tried to cement it into the form I'd described in my original proposal. Having never independently led a summer program for teens, I did not anticipate sporadic attendance, the difficulty of recruiting a committed group, and the resulting need for extra time to complete the project. These circumstances often left me frustrated and afraid that I would fail to facilitate a meaningful community experience for the participants. However, the magic of our end of the summer party, the earnest thank-you cards from parents, our group's devotion to the completion of the mural, and the Snoqualmie Valley community's excitement to see and take-to-heart the vision portrayed in the final mural—all served as welcome reminders of the positive impact of our project. Ultimately I learned that community-building projects cannot be sculpted to a rigid form by one person's will. Like the river that flows through our Valley, such projects must be fluid and able to adapt to the needs of community members. Viewed through a wider lens, I learned that peace building of any sort must be a collaboration—a collaged cacophony of possibilities—unified by the shared goal of creating a “place” that we are all proud to call *home*.

