THE NEW FACE OF PUBLIC ART

Project takes personal twist in celebrating a community

By Steve Annear
Globe Staff

Casantha Selmon watched from a bench at the Dudley branch of the Boston Public Library as volunteers dragged brushes slathered with a paste across an image of her face on the building’s wall.

Satisfied with the portrait’s position, the volunteers quickly moved on to the next picture—a modest likeness of Selmon’s goddaughter, Kimberly Wade, her hat beneath her chin.

Then they pasted the next image, the face of a man whom Selmon thought she recognized from the neighborhood.

For the volunteers, the photos were part of a larger community art project launched by French conceptual artist J.R. called “Inside Out.” For Selmon and her goddaughter, they were visual proof of their place in the Roslbury neighborhood.

“We are the faces of the mothers” in Roslbury, Selmon said, looking at her portrait.

“We need to learn our legacy. I’m a legacy.”

More than 70 people lined up and had their photos taken in the “Inside Out” truck at the library on Wednesday. Once the portraits were taken, they were printed on large pieces of paper and applied to the gray cement.

Jennifer Guarracino (left) and Martina Tanga with prints of residents whose photos were taken as part of the Inside Out Project.

Art project combines the public with the personal

Gilibert’s group brought “Inside Out” to Boston with the help of Roslbury Up Truck, a mobile art lab.

On Thursday, the photo booth truck will be parked outside Back Bay Station to create a second mural.

People’s personal tales of “resilience and courage” are also being collected by organizers and will be documented in a book that will be deposited at the Roslbury Library.

J.R., who is also responsible for the mural on the former Hancock building, launched “Inside Out” in March 2011, during a TED conference in California.

To date, more than 236,000 people in 126 countries have taken part in it, in places as far away as Nepal and Vietnam.

Each city’s project is archived and documented on the artist’s website.

Miguel Vasquez, 21, and his brother Jonathan were driving the truck when they saw the truck parked on the sidewalk.

“Thinking it was a food truck, they stopped to get some French fries,” said Kate Gilbert, director of Now and Then, a nonprofit arts organization.

Ellen Wells of Roslbury stood next to a picture of herself, which will be posted on a wall nearby.

“It’s beautiful,” said Alejandra Durban, 19, a junior at Northeastern University, who read about the project in Roslbury and visited the TED talk by J.R.

“It invites everyone to participate in it. It’s not something where you are outside of the project,” Durban said. “It has so many things tying it to the community.”

For C.D. Storm, the mural and the event took on a different meaning. It offered a perspective from the artists that sometimes overshadows the vibrant neighborhood, he said.

“It shows solidarity,” he said. “And that with all the mess and the drugs and the crime that’s going on, there are still good people who want to come together and see good things happen.”

Steve Annear can be reached at steve.annear@globe.com.

Follow him on Twitter @steveannear.