

## Mural for a neighborhood, art for us all

*A teacher's challenge, Whittier kids' dream, a muralist's guidance and residents' paintbrushes help Meldrum Park reflect city's heritage*

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Meldrum Park eases into darkness. Color fades from view, and the grass, the trees, the people all soften into shades of charcoal and shadow as they cut and flow through the dusk. Muralist Dave Loewenstein perches his laptop on a plain white table. An image illuminates the night, projecting onto the 150-foot blank wall that stretches across the park itself. Figures and shapes appear outlined in bold black line like a child's coloring book: a basketball hoop, a girl in a knit hat, a pair of hands grasping another pair of hands, lifting, perhaps, though it's hard to say which hands might be the helpers and which the helped.



Rhythms of a basketball slap the silence, but the players only check the artists with the occasional sidelong glance. Loewenstein and his team — mural assistant Ashley Jane Laird, apprentice Nate Buchholz and documentarian Nicholas Ward — are beginning a design transfer, where the original design for the mural is outlined onto the wall. To Loewenstein, the basketball players nearby are collaborators. “Make sure they know what we’re here for,” he murmurs. “Make sure they know when it’s their time to paint.”

Design transfer can be intense in its precision. The image must somehow line up perfectly against its imperfect landscape. Mosquitoes and other unseeable things that bite are shaken loose from their grassy resting places to clip at ankles. The hour is late. The park is dark. Hardly anyone is watching. Finally, Loewenstein is satisfied with the position of the design. The first stroke of paint is swiped onto the wall without fanfare, the peach-colored hue imperceptible in the absence of light. The team will work throughout the night. Long after the basketball players have rolled home, long after the neighborhood has settled into rest, the artists will still be advancing new sections of design along the wall, repositioning carefully each time the projection shifts.

Loewenstein has just arrived from a distant town and a distant mural. What is it like to celebrate a completed mural in the sunshine and then, a few days later, start again in the dark with fresh canvas and fresh paint? It’s the ultimate blank page, this enormous wall. It feels inviting and intimidating at the same time. “It’s all one wall to me,” Loewenstein tells me without averting his eyes from the design. I can’t decide if he is joking or being appropriately philosophical. Maybe a little of both. One wall, stretching across decades, connecting cities and citizens and artists who have never met.

He doesn't have much time to talk; he is focused on the task at hand. I leave the night to the artists and drive through the Whittier neighborhood, turning down the dimly lit streets where I once lived — past the St. Francis House, looping around Whittier Middle School, beyond the empty lot where the old gray church used to stand long after it had been transformed into a residence (though wayward strangers knocked on the door seeking salvation all the same). Manna Bakery, the old Flower Box, both asleep. All is quiet, save the crickets. And I am reminded: This is not where the story of the Meldrum Park mural begins.

### **This began ... in a classroom**

Now that I think of it, it's hard to say where exactly this story should start. (With the Contemporary Mural Movement of the 1960s? With 20 million immigrants flowing through Ellis Island?) For our purposes, let's begin in teacher Lela Himmerich's social studies classroom at Whittier Middle School in 2011.

It was spring, and Himmerich was taking her eighth grade class outside for some project-based learning. Her essential question: What is needed to keep the Whittier neighborhood vital? The students walked around the neighborhood with their teacher, who invited them to see things with "a whole new set of eyes." Some of the students had been getting off the bus for three years at the middle school but had never taken the time to walk around and see more than the footprint the school inhabits. Soon, every team was popping with ideas about what could be done in the neighborhood, and they prepared to share those ideas with an audience of community decision makers, including Sioux Falls Mayor Mike Huether.



Students from Lela Himmerich's class present their neighborhood revitalization plan.

"They really wanted their ideas to happen," Himmerich remembers. "The kids were super nervous. I told them, 'Your ideas are amazing. You are amazing. You are ready for this. Let it shine.' Then I just kept crossing my fingers that something would happen." The ideas the students initiated were varied. They wanted to help paint the Manna Bakery, an authentic Mexican bakery and popular after-school stop for students. They thought the old fire station at Heritage Park could be transformed into a local history museum for firefighters. They wanted to see a mural inside Whittier Middle School and a larger mural on the blank, oft-graffiti-tagged wall that dominates Meldrum Park.

Everyone agreed the presentations were excellent. And then — not much happened. The mayor went back to his office. The students went back to class. But this isn't where the story ends. Gigi Rieder, president of the Whittier Residents Association, had spent some time in San Antonio, where she was inspired by a six-story mural of the Virgin Mary painted on the external wall of a hospital. "There was art everywhere in San Antonio," she explains. "It really made you say, 'Wow.'" Which got her thinking about that ugly wall near her house by Meldrum Park.

Suddenly, the wall didn't look so ugly any more. At least not in her imagination. And then there was Nan Baker, of the Sioux Falls Arts Council, who knew how to make things happen through grant-writing, who also knew what the kids at Whittier had been up to, who connected with Rieder and Himmerich, and who didn't give up, even when the first Arts Council request for funds was denied by the United Way.

Enter muralist Dave Loewenstein — or at least a photograph of muralist Dave Loewenstein, which Baker came across right before she initiated a request for a prestigious “Our Town” grant through the National Endowment for the Arts. Are you following all of this? It’s called grass-roots community development. It’s not as common as it should be.

Fast-forward for a moment, a year or two from the grant-writing phase, to comments Loewenstein will make at the mural celebration: “This began at Whittier Middle School in a classroom with a teacher, Lela Himmerich, who had the foresight to teach not just the ABCs and the 123s, but to open her students up to what was right around them in their neighborhood, engaging them with real life and then not stopping when the class project was over, but taking it to the next logical level. Take it to the people who make decisions. What that means is, we need to pay a lot more attention to our teachers and our students in the public schools. They have great ideas that we need to follow through on.”

In case you were wondering, the outside of the Manna Bakery has already been painted. The students saw to that, too. And a mural inside Whittier Middle School is in the works. Look for it next year. As for the firefighter museum in Heritage Park ... anything is possible when the kids at Whittier put their minds to it.

### **Ellis Island of the Plains**

The design team meetings begin in the darkness of winter. Loewenstein has been secured as lead artist for the Meldrum Park mural, and the process of engaging the community has begun. In other words, the wall will be painted, but what will be painted on it? What sort of story do we want to share with the neighborhood, the city, the world? Loewenstein isn’t telling us, he’s asking us. My daughter has been chosen as one of the Whittier student artists, and so I drive her to the first design team meeting, not sure what is ahead.



Presentation about the mural project at the Sioux Falls Public Library.

We meet Loewenstein at the Museum of Visual Materials, where he introduces a gathering of local residents to the concept of public art. Who will see this mural? Christians. Muslims. Police officers. People who don’t want police officers to know what they are doing. Students. Babies. Grandparents. Basketball players. People who only drive by but would never dream of stopping. People who plant themselves by the wall and study it for hours. People who don’t speak English and don’t yet have the language to describe the cold of a South Dakota January. People whose ancestors have lived here since before memory. In a word, everyone.

Who sees a painting in an art museum? Well, that depends. And sometimes, even in Sioux Falls, it depends on who has the money to pay the admission price. We attend as many design meetings as we can, where we are invited to think, to talk, to draw out the ideas of our imaginations and those of others. My daughter is paired up at one point with a woman whose English is accented, and I can see from across the room that both are struggling with communication. But then the markers come out and they draw. The woman wants the park to have a fence so her

children won't run into the street. My daughter wants the mural to have vibrant colors and playful imagery, so people can dance in joy. They each draw their visions, and then they understand.



Loewenstein tells us that Sioux Falls has been referred to as the Ellis Island of the Plains. At home that night, my daughter sketches the Statue of Liberty reaching out to swaying fields of native grasslands. She gives her drawing to Loewenstein, who accepts it as he does every other idea the design team offers — openly and with gratitude. At some point, it does occur to me that everyone in Sioux Falls might not love this mural. Not because there is anything wrong with it. Just because that's the way people are.

A quote favored by Loewenstein (from Gwendolyn Brooks) comforts me:

“Does Man love Art? Man visits Art, but squirms. Art hurts. Art urges voyages — and it is easier to stay at home, the nice beer ready.”

I grew up in this neighborhood. My brother still lives here, in the house where I once lived, too. This is our place, and we know the colors and textures of it firsthand. When we see the final mural design, it does not make me squirm. It makes me want to spin around in celebration. Could people criticize what we are doing? Probably. In my experience, it is more likely they will discount it, marginalize it, overlook it. That’s just one of the things you learn growing up in this part of town. People have a tendency to underestimate you.



Design Team members present to the Visual Arts Commission.

### **This is a small village**

Finally, after approval from a variety of city officials, paint can go on the wall. Community painting weekend arrives. This is when we leave the relative cocoon of design team meetings and bump brushes with a whole lot of people we’ve never met before, because everyone is invited to paint. And everyone does.

Iman Mahgoub often comes to Meldrum Park with her friends to drink coffee and let the children play. She used to live in a place where she was scared. But here, her children are safe. She and her daughter served on the design team. “This is a small village,” she says of the Whittier neighborhood. “People help show you where to go. It’s good for the kids. They aren’t in danger.” Akoat Mater swishes some yellow on the wall in the place where the artists have guided her. This is new for her, but her brush strokes are bold and sure. “Sometimes I color with my kids, but I’ve never painted like this before.”

At one point, I return from my car to find my daughter at the far end of the wall, painting next to a man I’ve never seen before, and my stomach tightens. Why would they paint so close together? She doesn’t know him. Isn’t Loewenstein paying attention? He could have placed them farther apart so they could paint in peace. And then I get it. They are painting in peace. They work around one another with respect and laughter. When they are done she comes skipping down the hill to tell me about her new friend. She couldn’t understand when he told her where he was originally from, but he owns a shop where he cuts hair. Maybe we could all get our haircuts from him someday?

Loewenstein understands all this. He plans it, I see now. He plants people right next to one another as they paint so they can begin to grow across the expanse of culture and language and life experience. They drip paint on one another, and they laugh about it. He knows there will be people who have never held a brush before and may never again. He knows that every time they pass by they will remember where they stood and what color they used and who stood next to them as they made their collective mark.



Kim Avilarivas has just painted part of a hand. As soon as I ask her about painting, she starts talking about Whittier Middle School. “People think it’s not safe or that there’s not a lot of people who care about you, but that’s not true at all,” she says. “We’re spirited and talented. We care about our community. We make it better. Art is a way to express how you feel. This mural expresses how we feel about our community. It feels like finally your voice was heard in the city of Sioux Falls.” Avilarivas is 13 years old, and, like most kids who grow up in this neighborhood, she feels the weight of judgment from those who grow up somewhere else. I’m not sure she’s any worse for that knowledge. It seems to me she’s plenty happy to prove them wrong.

I go home at the end of the day with paint on my hands. The paint is the color of skin but not the color of my skin. I can’t bear to wash it off.

### **Look, and keep looking**

At some point, it occurs to all of us that Dave Loewenstein and Ashley Jane Laird aren’t actually from around here. In other words: Pretty soon, they have to leave. There’s no getting around it. “We are completely aware this is about much more than making a mural together or beautifying a neighborhood,” Loewenstein says. “This is about re-engaging the people with the neighborhood, encouraging people to have a new experience with the way they live — an experience that can compete with what we’re taught culturally, by the media, by our families.”

I spent two hours talking with Loewenstein on a day when painting had been rained out. I have pages of notes and quotes that I didn’t include here. In the end, I don’t think the muralist would have wanted this to be a piece about him, even though much of Sioux Falls may never fully realize just how significant he is on the national scene. He taught us that early on, now that I think about it. I’ve stood in front of a Monet painting and a van Gogh, among others. They were worth millions of dollars. Art reaches the pinnacle of financial clout when it can be picked up and moved, cordoned off. When it can change hands. When it can be protected from elements and from the fingerprints and flashbulbs of its admirers. When you can peer as closely as the security guard will allow and imagine the story of a life in the signature of pigment and brush stroke.

Loewenstein’s work holds the brush strokes of a community — hundreds of people. It’s a collage, a celebration, a mirror. It isn’t worth a penny, to some. And yet, it’s worth more than that Monet all the same, isn’t it? The artist spoke at the mural dedication: “Most of us, I imagine, look up trying to decode the matrix of symbols and patterns,

wondering what they mean, what was intended by the artists, and should we be proud ... or offended? Good. Look, and keep looking. Ask questions.”

There is talk of hosting a story time in front of the wall, or an exercise class. Certainly the women of the neighborhood will be there still, coffee in hand, children dashing about their feet in a colorful blur. The basketball players have played ball throughout the transformation of neighborhood and neighbor, and they will continue as well, though more than a few now have flecks of paint on their shoes. My daughter has a new basketball of her own. You’ll see us there, shooting and missing, shooting and swishing.



There is a sense, a palpable sense, that the people around here may never look at a blank wall the same way again. They may never look at their neighbors the same way again. They may never look at their own hands the same way again.

Because this isn't where the story ends.

This, perhaps, is where the story begins.

Written by Lori Walsh for the Argus Leader