

## With Color and Creativity, Kathy Koury Leads *I Madonnari* and the Children's Creative Project

By Lara Cooper, Noozhawk Staff Writer | [@laraanncooper](#)



The nonprofit leader was recently recognized for her 30 years of leadership in the local arts community

It was the summer of 1986, and Kathy Koury had journeyed to Grazie di Curtatone, Italy, in search of a big idea.

The Children's Creative Project director had traveled to the rural region of northern Italy to observe the sumptuous street drawings of the Italian street painters.

The artisans had been chalk drawing religious icons like the Madonna in the shadow of the country's churches since the 16th century, earning them the title of madonnari.

Fast forward almost 400 years, and Koury watched the artists create street drawings with deep blues and rich ochres, tradition still intact.

Their work took on incredible detail, materializing on the pavement with the texture and depth of an oil painting.

Koury had been in search of a new fundraising idea to help support her nonprofit's work to bring the arts to underserved students, and thought the chalk drawings coming to life in the town's piazza could be just the hook needed to fundraise.

"I couldn't believe how wonderful it was and how perfectly it suited our organization," she said.

That was three decades ago, and Koury's brainchild, the I Madonnari Italian Street Painting Festival has been a part of Santa Barbara's traditions ever since.

The festival takes place each Memorial Day weekend outside of the Santa Barbara Mission.

Koury said the event was the first festival of its kind in North America, and each year the festival draws about 25,000 visitors to view the artwork created on the pavement.

Earlier this month, Koury was presented with the 2015 Leadership in the Arts award from the Santa Barbara County Arts Commission, which honors people and organizations that have made a significant impact on the local arts and culture.

Koury and the Children's Creative Project were honored for their work that brings art to children in local schools.

The I Madonnari Festival is a big part of the project's success and functions as CCP's biggest fundraiser, which many people don't realize, Koury said.

The organization is dedicated to providing arts experiences for underserved children not normally exposed to the arts.

Seventy-five percent of the students CCP serves or students of color from lower-income families.

In 2014, the Children's Creative Project provided visual and performing arts education programs for roughly 50,000 students in 94 public schools.

"I just want students to have the arts," Koury told Noozhawk from her office earlier this month.

Her workspace is lined with I Madonnari posters from previous years, and Koury recalled returning home from that Italy trip, and what happened next.

A neighbor working on the mission's bicentennial celebration heard about Koury's idea and asked her to come present the idea to the mission's committee, which included Father Virgil Cordano.

Koury hadn't even gotten her slides back from the developer and only had snapshots she'd taken on the trip.

That was enough, however.

“Within 15 minutes, they signed on,” she said.

For the next 10 months, Koury estimates she worked 10 hours a day to prepare for the festival.

She came up with an idea to have local businesses and individuals sponsor the street paintings, an idea which has allowed them to sell out every year.

The group also does all of the food at the festival, and Unico Santa Barbara, an Italian-American service organization, sponsors the food booth.

CCP’s board members volunteered to develop and manage all of the festival’s food booths during the three-day weekend festival.

The hard work of Koury and her team paid off — 10,000 people showed up the first year.

It’s been 30 years since her big idea and in January, the Children’s Creative Project team will begin to ramp up preparations for 2016’s I Madonnari festival.

In 2006, Koury and the CCP board were instrumental in creating the first street painting festival in Mexico in the Plaza Principal of Santa Barbara’s sister city Puerto Vallarta.

She had just returned from Puerto Vallarta’s festival this November when she learned she had won the arts in leadership award.

The director said it’s rewarding to be recognized for her work in the arts, which have long been a part of her own life.

Koury was born in Santa Barbara and attended McKinley, Santa Barbara Junior High and Santa Barbara High schools. She majored in dance at UCSB, and was also interested in other arts areas, like music and fiber arts.

“I was interested in everything,” she said.

In her early 20s, she began volunteering for the Children’s Creative Project in 1972, where she worked for five years before becoming executive director in 1977, a role she has held ever since.

The CCP became a nonprofit in 1974 under the Santa Barbara County Education Office and William Cirone and since its beginning, the program has grown from reaching 200 students annually to 50,000 each year with its outreach services.

During her tenure, Koury says that attitudes about the arts have changed, for the better, and that most principals see the need for the arts and support them.

There are still challenges, like carving time out of the day for arts programs when pressure is on schools to raise test scores, she said.

The Santa Maria-Bonita School District recently approached Koury to create a district-wide arts plan, and now 16 schools have programming providing dance, theater and vocal music.

Each year, the organization creates an arts catalog that details 200 local and non-local, multicultural touring artists.

Districts and teachers can look through the catalog and decide which artists can perform for their students, and pay a fee to the CCP, which pays the artists.

CCP supports resident artists conducting workshops at the schools as well touring artists who come to the area.

It's an opportunity for the kids to see professional artists and dream big for their own lives, Koury said.

About 4,000 students will get the chance in April to see the Alvin Ailey Dance Troupe perform for free at the Arlington Theater. In 2015, almost 5,000 students saw performers from Las Cafeteras and Ballet Folklorico perform at the Santa Barbara Bowl.

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