Egmont Street community mural celebrates diversity

By Emma R. Murphy  
emurphy@wickedlocal.com

Posted Aug 11, 2018 at 7:01 AM

Among the red brick buildings that make up the Brookline Public Housing Authority's Egmont Street Apartments stands a wall brought to life with vibrant colors, flowers, instruments and “welcome” written in 29 languages.

Called “Together We Thrive”, it is the Egmont Street Apartments’ first community mural.

Painted on the exterior of the Egmont Public Housing Community Room, every aspect of the mural, from its inception to the finishing touches, are the product of teamwork.

The idea for the project came from an Egmont Street resident who approached the Brookline Arts Center (BAC) with the idea, according to BAC Executive Director Lauren Riviello.

The BAC partnered with the Brookline Housing Authority and applied for, and received, a grant from the Brookline Community Foundation. The Brookline Food Pantry and Egmont Street Tenants Association also joined in as partners, Economy True Value donated most of the materials and soon, the BAC brought in artist Silvia López Chavez to lead the project.

Community input

López Chavez has painted several murals all over Boston, from commissioned murals to community murals. The community murals, she said, are special for the sense of togetherness and ownership they foster among residents.

“There’s more ownership,” said López Chavez. “And [the] more sense that this belongs to them, they care for it.”

With the community in mind, López Chavez and the BAC started gathering input from residents by holding brainstorming meetings, putting out idea boxes and putting up whiteboards in the community room for residents to draw on.
“It was definitely a community process,” said López Chavez.

At first, gathering community input was slow-going, Rivielli said, but as word spread the project picked up speed and soon many of the residents were actively participating and ideas came pouring in. This is also where community murals can be challenging, according to López Chavez.

“The hard part of community projects is there are a lot of people with a lot of different ideas,” she said.

The challenge lies in sifting through those ideas and trying to distill what makes a certain community.

‘Incredible’ diversity in Egmont

As she worked with the residents and discussed ideas, what struck López Chavez was the community’s diversity.

“It’s incredible how many different cultural backgrounds are represented there,” said López Chavez.

That diversity, coupled with the “Welcome” signs that the Commission for Diversity, Inclusion and Community Relations had posted around Brookline at the beginning of the year, inspired López Chavez to write the word “welcome” in 29 languages.

All 29 of those languages are spoken in the Egmont Street Apartments, according to Riviello.

In addition to the languages, the mural also depicts national flowers from many of the residents’ cultures and countries, as well as musical instruments, which was one idea that kept popping up in the community feedback, according to Riviello.

Bringing people together

For López Chavez, the experience of creating the mural was an example of how humanness, shared needs and desires, can bring together people from all walks of life.

“We come from so many places and so many cultures and yet we can find so many things that are common,” López Chavez said.

That same notion is what inspired the mural’s name, “Together We Thrive”.

“It’s really coming from the feeling that we are currently living in broken times, there needs to be more togetherness,” said López Chavez.

As her work on the mural progressed, López Chavez said she saw residents become increasingly involved in the project. Some would bring treats like cupcakes and water, others helped paint during a community paint day and others stopped by just to chat. She recalled one man who would stop by almost every day to talk, drawn out by his grandchildren who were helping with the mural. López Chavez asked him if his language was included on the mural and when he said no, she promptly added it, bringing the total languages represented on the mural to 29.