

Van Go teens painting mural in southern Lawrence that honors wildlife, Native American culture



photo by: Dylan Lysen/Lawrence Journal-World

Van Go Art Director Rick Wright, far right, shows a teenager a specific brush stroke to use for a section of a mural she is working on while other teens paint breaking waves and the face of a Native American woman. The mural, which is on an underpass in southern Lawrence, honors the wildlife and Native American culture of the area.

As young artists ran paint brushes over a concrete wall in southern Lawrence, Rick Wright explained the types of brush strokes that would suit the project.

Wright, the art director for Van Go Inc., told one teenager she could make the strokes move in a direction to suggest a breaking wave, and he told another teen that he could dot the image with his brush to provide more texture.

With Wright's guidance, the teens were working together through the arts-based social service program to paint an image honoring the natural wildlife and historic Native American culture of the Lawrence area. The mural, which is expected to be completed later this month, is being painted on a 12-by-52-foot support structure of an underpass that goes beneath 31st Street on its way to the Baker Wetlands trail.

The mural is the latest example of Van Go creating a piece of public art while also providing services to area youth. The Douglas County Commission wanted the mural on the county-owned underpass in hopes that it would deter hateful graffiti at the site, as happened recently. The project highlights the "healing power of art," Wright said.

Additionally, the project offers a chance for 12 of the organization's participants to get outside and put their artistic talents to work.

"Amid a pandemic, this is something that really means a lot to them to be able to have a work opportunity and engage with each other when they've been

relegated at home for the most part,” Wright said. “Ultimately (this project) is what we can do for them and make their experience a positive thing.”

The blueprint

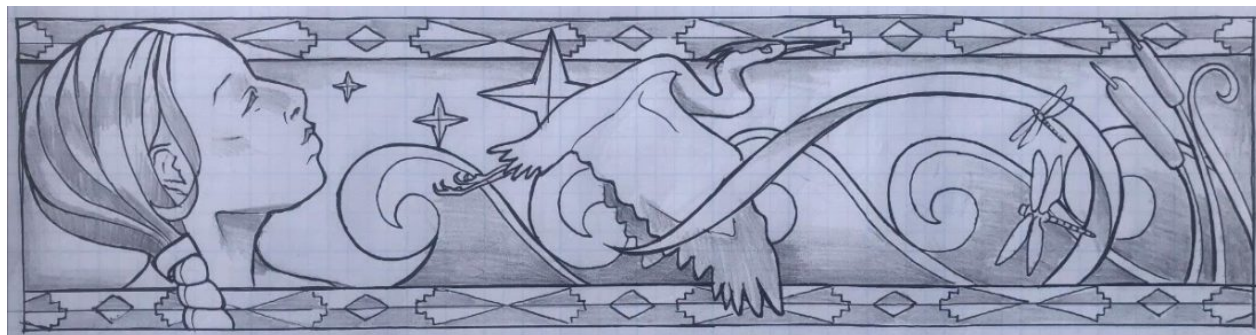


photo by: Contributed photo

A blueprint of the mural Van Go is placing on an underpass in southern Lawrence aims to honor the local wildlife of the Baker Wetlands and the culture of Native Americans and Haskell Indian Nations University. Rick Wright, art director for Van Go, collaborated with artist Mona Cliff, who is Native American, on the blueprint.

Normally, the youth in Van Go would participate in crafting the image for a new mural project, but that was not possible with this one, Wright said. With a short timeframe and the coronavirus pandemic, Wright said the organization had to streamline the design process.

But the teens were still provided with “life skills” support for the project, as lecturers from the Baker Wetlands Discovery Center and Haskell Indian Nations University educated them on the history of the area in terms of wildlife and indigenous people.

“It’s always really important there is an educational piece when we come into a project,” Wright said. “There was a pretty large educational piece we were really pleased to bring to our youth,” he added.

Wright said he collaborated with Lawrence artist Mona Cliff to craft a blueprint for the mural. The design they came up with features images of local wildlife, including a blue heron and dragonflies, as well as an image of a Native American woman looking up into the stars.

Cliff, who is Native American, told the Journal-World the mural also includes other native imagery. The border on the top and bottom of the mural is derived from Osage ribbon work, which is an homage to how the Lawrence area and Kansas were the Osage tribe’s traditional home.

“The ribbon work is used in their regalia and a lot of the things they use to dress themselves with when they are participating in ceremonies,” Cliff said.

Cliff said she was happy Wright reached out to her and her husband, Jimmy Beason, a professor at Haskell who served as a lecturer to the teens, to participate. Cliff is an enrolled member of the Grós Ventre tribe in Fort Belknap, Mont., and Beason is enrolled in the Osage tribe, she said.

“For me, I feel like it’s a real step forward for including indigenous people’s voices,” Cliff said. “It was a good way to not just make art about natives, but include native voices in the process.”

Youth involvement



photo by: Dylan Lysen/Lawrence Journal-World

A Lawrence teen participating in Van Go paints on the background color of a mural being placed on a support structure of an underpass in southern Lawrence.

Two high school students in Lawrence who are working on the mural said they were impressed with the image and happy to be part of the process.

Ayana, one of the students, said the teens have been learning about different painting techniques and tools. (Van Go asked the Journal-World to not print the teens' last names because they are minors in a social services program.)

She said the image Cliff and Wright created was a great idea. As a Native American herself, she is happy to see the culture being shown.

"It's well known Native Americans lived here, and we do have Haskell, but it's not really represented," Ayana said.

Another student, Ian, said he was excited to be participating in another mural project for the opportunity to express himself. He said that when he joined Van Go he did not consider himself artistic, but after a few projects he now sees himself as an artist.

"I wasn't really interested in art because I never thought of myself being good at it," Ian said. "But art isn't really something you necessarily have to be good at. You just have to express yourself with it."

Ian said he also liked working with the other teens to bring the mural to life. He said working together is the "only way we can get it done."

"It's really cool to see something you created out there," he said.

'A lovely turn of events'



photo by: Dylan Lysen/Lawrence Journal-World

A local teen paints a section of a mural that honors local wildlife and Native American culture. A copy of the proposed image is taped to the wall to the painter's left.

The Douglas County Commission explored the possibility of a mural on the underpass after a resident found racist and anti-Semitic graffiti there in 2019.

The resident, Cheryl Lester, said a mural would be a good way to deter such hateful messages on the blank concrete canvas. The commissioners agreed, which led the county to ask Van Go to conduct the project, *the Journal-World reported*.

Now that the painting is underway, Commissioner Nancy Thellman said the design was “fantastic” and she’s looking forward to seeing the finished project. Thellman also said that focusing on the native history of the area was a good way to flip the graffiti around.

“It’s a great way to turn something that was pretty ugly into something beautiful,” Thellman said. “It really is a lovely turn of events.”

Cliff said she appreciated the county's stance. She said someone recently marked derogatory messages on a mural she previously made, and she addressed it in a similar fashion by painting over it.

She said the county's plan to address hate through making something new is the best way to handle those situations.

"Turning things around like this through art is the best way to deter (it)," Cliff said. "If someone is going to write something hateful, instead of focusing on that we'll just create something that's more positive.

"Plus, it totally needed to be painted down there," Cliff said of the underpass while laughing. "It's begging to be painted on."

Contact Dylan Lysen

Have a story idea, news or information to share? Contact reporter Dylan Lysen:

- dlysen@ljworld.com
- 785-832-6353
- *Twitter: @DylanLysen*
- *Read other stories by Dylan*

