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Mural projects unite neighbors

They're drawing praise from North Limestone to Southland

By Robin Roenker

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If he weren't busy enough already as co-owner of Al's Bar, Les Miller now has a new pastime at work: watching passersby lose themselves in the new mural that covers the bar's entire south side.

The once bare wall at Sixth and Limestone is now a stunning visual homage to the culture and rich musical heritage of Lexington's north side. There in lifelike detail is a montage of some of the greatest jazz, blues, rock and even bluegrass musicians Lexington has produced—all of whom got their start performing in the North Limestone neighborhood.

"It stops traffic," Miller said of the mural. "We sit in the bar and watch people looking at it, forgetting to go when the light turns green. Then cars behind them start to honk, but they stop, too, once they get close enough to see the mural themselves. People have come in and talked at great length about how much it changes their perception of the area."

Spearheaded by the North Limestone Neighborhood Association, the Al's Bar mural is one of four funded in the first round of the new Lexington Outdoor Mural Project, a joint effort between LexArts and the Lexington-Fayette Urban County Government that aims to celebrate Lexington's history by honoring the unique character of its various neighborhoods through public art.

The murals are being credited with bringing together people of all ages, races and cultures who live in the neighborhoods they represent. Neighborhood associations have rallied neighbors in support of the projects, gaining creative input and historical insight from those who live the communities.

Besides the mural on Al's Bar, another mural, sponsored by the YMCA of Central Kentucky with representatives from Gray Construction and Kentucky Utilities, was recently completed on the Vine Street side of the High Street YMCA. A third, sponsored by the Southland Association and slated for installation on 527 Southland Drive, will be completed soon. Work is also under way on a fourth mural, to be installed on LexTran's new fuel and wash facility at 105 West Loudon Ave.

LexArts received 26 nominations for mural sites submitted by roughly 16 neighborhood associations and community groups, said Nathan Zamarron, community arts manager for LexArts.

Additional sites submitted this year may be earmarked for mural funding next year, and LexArts also plans to conduct a new call for mural nominations in the spring.

The \$45,000 budget for the first three murals comes from funds raised through HorseMania, which had always been earmarked for public arts projects, Zamarron said. LexTran is funding the \$20,000 to install the fourth mural, Zamarron said.

Partnership of music, art

After learning of LexArts' call for mural nominations earlier this spring, a committee of 8-12 members of the North Limestone Neighborhood Association began meeting regularly to help canvass opinions of the group's members — association president Marty Clifford says that includes "anyone who lives, works, goes to school or goes to church" at any of the area's 2,500 homes or businesses up and down Limestone from Main Street

to New Circle Road.

Unanimously, members wanted to celebrate the area's diversity and its rich cultural and musical history, Clifford said. They also felt the theme resonated for Al's Bar, which is trying to bring live music back to an area once known for famed music and dance venues like Joyland, the Lyric and Dixieland Gardens.

Painted by local artist Micheal Burrell, the Al's Bar mural features jazz musicians Les McCann, Duke Madison, George Gentry, Byron Romanowitz and others jamming along with the Dunbar High School marching band with director Charles Quillings, big band favorite The Smoke Richardson Band and bluegrass phenom J.D. Crowe.

To unveil the completed mural, the neighborhood association hosted a street party on Sept. 20 — complete with eight hours of live music and even belly dancing performances. They sent out special invitations to relatives of the musicians depicted in the mural, many of whom still live in the North Limestone area. The event also served as a fund-raiser for the association's goal of building a stage in nearby Duncan Park to foster music education and performance opportunities for neighborhood children.

"We brought people together that night in a way that we had no idea we were going to," Miller said.

The 150 or so in attendance at the party included all ages, all races, all income levels, people from all walks of life — all dancing and smiling together.

"You could see the pride there," said Clifford.

North Limestone Association member Leisa Pickering, who with her husband, Bill, served on the mural committee, said the mural has created a sense of pride and hope in the area.

"I think it has touched heartstrings in the community that we don't even know," she said.

Touching the community

Local artist Waseem Touma, a native of Sydney, Australia, was chosen to create the mural near the High Street YMCA because his urban, graffiti-esque style was just the type of "edgy, progressive, challenging" art YMCA arts director Dave Peterson and other committee members felt best represented the downtown spirit.

"An outdoor mural project brings life and activity to the community and offers a way for its members to connect," said David Elsen, the High Street YMCA's executive director.

Touma called the opportunity to paint his first major public art piece within his own neighborhood — he lives just blocks from the High Street YMCA, where he is a member — "an absolute honor."

Touma did his mural painting on site, working daily for six weeks, and the interaction and feedback he got from the community were inspiring, he said.

On one morning within minutes, an older man, a young boy on a skateboard and a nurse on a bicycle all approached Touma to tell him how much they admired his work. Other passersby told him how much they enjoyed watching the mural go from first a black and white sketch to more and more colors as Touma filled in the scene. Daily, people would honk and yell encouragement to him as he worked.

"I'm honestly still overwhelmed," said Touma, who put the final, finishing protective coats on his mural earlier this month. "Imagine getting 30 compliments in a day. I'd go home glowing. As an artist, I reached so many people in one go. I'm still trying to work out for myself how that happened. I watched it grow just like everyone else did."

The LexTran mural — designed by Lexington-native Mike Lockett and his wife, Jenny Baggs, owners of a mural firm called Number Walls headquartered in Nashville — utilizes a paint-by-numbers concept, so that LexTran employees and their family members and volunteers from the nearby Castlewood and North Limestone Neighborhood Associations will be able to help paint 5 to 10 percent of the total mural, said Dave Riggins, LexTran's director of community affairs.

The mural depicts the history of public transit in Lexington, from horse-drawn carriages and downtown trolleys

to today's buses. It is slated for completion in late November.

Lockett and Baggs did a previous outdoor mural in Nashville that allowed for community volunteer involvement, to great success.

"Everyone had a really great time on that project," Lockett said. "The real estate agency who commissioned that mural wanted to include the community in its creation as a way of cutting down on graffiti and increasing a sense of neighborhood ownership. It really did bring the community together. Hopefully it will here in Lexington, too."

Ryan Koch, president of the Castlewood Neighborhood Association, said his group's roughly 30 members are looking forward to their volunteer paint day with the LexTran mural as an opportunity to "come together and get to know each other over a common task to help beautify the neighborhood."

A sense of unity

Fresh off completion of the AI's Bar mural, Micheal Burrell is busy on his next task at hand — creating the Southland Association mural during long hours at his Flying Armadillo Signs studio in Nicholasville.

Unlike Touma and Lockett and Baggs who paint on site, Burrell prefers to paint his murals in his studio, on 1/8-inch plastic boards coated in aluminum, which are later installed at the mural site.

The Southland mural will include an image of shoppers at the Southland Farmer's Market and portraits of bluegrass musicians Earl Scruggs, Travis Tritt and Alison Krauss — a nod to the Southland area's successful summer bluegrass concert series, the Southland Jamboree. Trees and other greenscapes in the mural are symbolic of the association's environmental initiatives, including the recent groundbreaking on two rain gardens to be installed behind Good Foods Market and Café and in front of the Oleika Temple.

"Southland is a family neighborhood center, a place you go for a unique shopping experience," said Southland Association member and Willcutt Guitars owner Bob Willcutt, who also owns the building at 527 Southland Drive on which the mural will be installed.

Phil Wyant, president of the Southland Association, which includes 65 members and is open to businesses and residents alike, says the mural "symbolizes what's going on in the Southland community today."

"It's a unity that we've never had before, and an ability to work together to accomplish things that none of us could do by ourselves," he said.