TRAC Mural Project A Symbol of Gratitude For First Responders, Essential Workers, Hometown Heroes

By: Victoria Ford

The Toms River Artist Community has organized a community mural that will transform a concrete retaining wall in the Robbins Parkway parking lot downtown into a symbol of togetherness and gratitude for the whole town to enjoy.



Artists Celebrate Mural. Photo Credit: Lisa Ciferetto

The mural bears the signatures of 216 contributors who helped bring it to life, ranging in age from five months to 97 years old. (The baby's painted thumb-print appears on the signature panel, courtesy of Mom; and the oldest painter participated in memory of her veteran husband.) Among the painters were students, parents, artists, scouts, teachers, disabled children and adults, local businesspeople and their staff. TRAC artists helped along the way and took on the final detail work to tie it all together. Toms River's public works staff cleared away trees and debris and power washed the wall in preparation for the install and big reveal party in the parking lot.

The whole process of making the mural "was really a very humbling experience," TRAC President Lisa Cifaretto explained. She had no previous experience with mural painting or executing such a large-scale public art project, she said. Cifaretto's art identity is LMCArtNJ. She does photography, resin art, acrylic painting, mixed media. She's a retired chef who moved back to Jersey from Florida to help her parents after Superstorm Sandy.

TRAC formed in 2013. When Cifaretto got involved, the organization had 11 members; now it has 58, with a mission strongly rooted in community. The group meets on the second Tuesday of each month, hangs new artwork in the gallery monthly, and is dedicated to putting art in the public's eyes and hands.

TRAC's two-fold mission is to strengthen the artist community by creating an affordable, active and vibrant environment where local artists can work, teach, and exhibit their art – thus enriching the culture and the arts in our local community – and, by doing so, to serve as part of the catalyst for revitalization in Downtown Toms River.

While the mural project, the first of its kind, was already underway in 2019, the inspiration for the design grew out of the pandemic. Approvals had already been obtained, but before the artists got too far in the planning process, the pandemic stopped them in their creative tracks.

When the Washington Street gallery closed in March of 2020, TRAC members had plenty of time to think about what they wanted to do, Cifaretto explained. As the weeks and months passed, the answer became clear: "We decided we had to do something to help pull the Toms River community together."



Mural In Progress.
Photo credit: Lisa Ciferetto

The original theme was hands, she explained, but in the end, the wall art would be dedicated to the first responders, the essential workers, and the hometown heroes that stepped up during the pandemic to help their neighbors.

During the shutdown, the gallery moved from the back of the Washington Street shops to the front, where it was more visible from the street. Passersby would walk in off the sidewalk and ask questions – often about the Halloween parade, which was cancelled in 2020. Toms River's Halloween parade is touted as one of the largest in the world, and a keystone of the community.

Inspiration struck.

Organizers concluded: "Toms River needed its parade, so why not paint it on a wall?"

Cifaretto and VP Kat Tobin "basically do everything together," so together, along with Karen Knight, they figured out the design and the logistics.

The mural would embody the spirit of courage and selflessness shown daily by the first responders and hometown heroes, from one emergency to another and from one crisis to the next.

Karen Knight created the drawing they presented to the township's Community Art Project, Business Improvement District, parking authority and planning board. The design includes an American flag and many vehicles that appear to pull it along, as in a parade, followed by a sunset. A sea plane carries a "thank you" banner.

"The mural isn't about the recent pandemic and devastating impact of COVID," according to Cifaretto. "It is about all of the dedication and commitment that existed in our community long before and that we know will be present long after the current crisis subsides."

To their own great surprise, the artists were awarded the 5-by-120-foot wall at 27 Iron Street, in the free parking lot.

With the design approved, the work really began.

First the 5-foot panels of mural paper were cut and primed; then each section of the drawing was projected onto a panel and traced, which proved more difficult than they had expected. While the three women were sketching out the mural image, other TRAC members were soliciting donations and support for the mural project and recruiting painters.

"My phone was blowing up after we put the first post out (seeking painters)," she said. "We were blown away by the response." Over 200 townspeople, mostly children, wanted to be involved. "In our hearts we were thrilled; in our minds we were overwhelmed," she confessed.

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Scheduling painters to come into the gallery in socially distanced shifts was tricky, but the nice thing was family units could stay together, Cifaretto said. Thankfully the BID provided its community room and three other empty stores at The Downtown Shops on Main.

Cifaretto worked out a COVID-safe schedule to accommodate every painter.

The paint they used was an outdoor acrylic by Sherwin-Williams. They mixed all their own colors from the primaries. The painted mural paper then got adhered to the thrice-primed wall with gel medium and then got a layer of sealer.

The original install/unveil date of Memorial Day Weekend was pushed back to allow extra time for the kids to finish painting. At the very heart of the whole process was the experience of seeing the young ones work together, according to Cifaretto.

“We have met so many talented young artists,” she said. “We witnessed children laughing, helping each other, and talking about their heroes. About a third of the children who participated had parents in the health care field. They shared stories with us about how COVID affected their families, and about how they were scared for their parents and for themselves.

“I believe the painting of this mural was like therapy for these children. When they shared their stories with each other, they realized they were not alone. To me that was the greatest outcome of this mural. It has brought peace to so many and given them a chance to say thank you to all their heroes.”

Follow the project from the very beginning in photos and videos at **facebook.com/appreciationmural**. A memorial book chronicling the project from start to finish will be published after the install.

Funding for the project came from local donors, private individuals and businesses, and from a crowdfunding campaign on social media.

“TRAC is profoundly grateful for this experience,” Cifaretto said. “We have met so many great people in town – so many talented children.”

Two outgrowths of the Appreciation Mural project were a partnership with the Filipino-American Community Development Center (where art teacher Christina Lua is a TRAC member), and the TRAC Kids Korner, a new dedicated section of the gallery that showcases young artists each month.

Children from the FACDC hung 13 pieces of art in the TRAC gallery for the month of May and were featured in an opening reception. Four of the young artists sold their artwork the night of the opening.

Hence the TRAC Kids Korner was established, for artists ages 13 and younger to showcase their artworks. And junior memberships to TRAC are now available for high school students ages 14 to 18.

Also in the works are kids’ classes and live pet portrait paintings during downtown nights out. In addition to its own gallery, TRAC hangs work at Sweetwaters Coffee & Tea at the Ocean County Mall; TRAC artists set up tents on Wednesdays at the Mathis House and sell art there; and the group is working with the Seaport Museum to hold weekend art shows at their facility.

