

DAILY NEWS

Putting petals to metal



Survivors and volunteers work on art to adorn taxicabs at Head Injury Association in Commack. Photos by Stephen Barcelo

Commack head injury survivors deck taxis with painted flowers

BY JOHN LAUINGER
DAILY NEWS WRITER

THIS FALL, New York City's iconic yellow medallion taxicabs will do more than just shuttle people around Gotham — they'll bloom in kaleidoscopic color.

From September through New Year's Eve, the city's fleet of 13,087 yellow cabs will be festooned with painted flowers as part of the exhibit "Garden in Transit: New York City in Full Bloom."

The taxicab transformation is being produced by the California-based not-for-profit Portraits of Hope, which conducts large-scale art projects that allow people suffering from serious illnesses, physical handicaps, traumas and adversity to experience the therapeutic effects of artistic expression.

In its search for painters, Portraits of Hope visited the Head Injury Association in Commack, where more than 100 survivors of traumatic brain injuries painted

in celebration of Brain Injury Awareness Month in New York State.

The petal-painting gave the strong-willed survivors a chance to participate in something that the entire city will see, which they hope will raise public awareness of traumatic brain injuries.

"A lot of the people here lost their ability to speak, so the art becomes a voice when no other words can be found," said Susan Goodman, an art therapist at the Head Injury Association.

In a large room filled with sounds of many people having a good time, Maria Bauer sat on the floor, painting petals pink.

The 53-year-old Medford resident, who suffered a brain injury in a car accident years ago in Huntington Station, lives in one of the assisted living homes the Head Injury Association operates.

"I think it's beautiful," she said of the "Garden in Transit" project. "It's a beautiful idea: to let the world be aware of TBI and handicapped people."



A New York City yellow taxi gets even more colorful with floral vinyl decals covering its trunk and hood.

Nearby, William Nichols of Syosset painted in light blue with the aid of a pole-mounted brush, which allows him to work paint from his wheelchair.

Once an avid musician, the 58-year-old retired gravedigger has led a quiet life since a horrific head-on collision on Deer Park Ave. in 1982 damaged his brain and paralyzed the left side of his body.

"I think that anything that

brings color to New York City is a good thing," he said, as he chatted about the book he wrote and his time in the Army.

When asked what participating in "Garden in Transit" means to him, the author wasted no words. "It gives me purpose," he said. "It gives meaning to my existence."

The art program also has reached out to hospitals, health care institutions and after-school

programs in underserved communities in the five boroughs as well as Long Island.

In the end, more than 800,000 square-feet of multicolored, floral-printed vinyl decals will cover the trunks and hoods of every taxi in the city's fleet — and the tops of those that aren't already crowned with triangular advertisements, said Ed Massey, 43, who co-founded "Portraits of Hope" with his brother, Bernie, in 1995.

Massey said the decorated cabs will serve as symbols of hope and healing for people coping with adversity.

He said brightening the cityscape with help from such people will show how valuable public brushstrokes, so to speak, can be in beautifying parts of the city's infrastructure.

"Because of the elevation of the city, the taxi top is the perfect canvas," Massey added.

The project is headquartered on the ground floor of the Hotel Pennsylvania at 149 W. 32nd St., where it holds two "open paint days" each week.

"We have so much left to paint. We still need a lot of participants," Massey said, explaining that anyone can volunteer to participate at the Web site www.gardenintransit.org.