

## Community icons become canvases for kids' art, hopes, dreams

By Kevin Livelli

The old ballroom at the Hotel Pennsylvania in Manhattan hasn't seen this type of action in years. No stuffy dinner conversation, though, nor tinkling of glasses. Just laughter--the infectious kind you can only get from two dozen first, second and third graders.

In oversized T-shirts with "I Love NY" barely legible through paint stains, the kids were sprawled out in groups of two around giant blank canvases as big as themselves, painting giant flowers. In September, their work will appear on some 12,700 yellow taxis in New York. That certainly got their motors running. And they've learned some valuable lessons.

"You get to express what you want to do in the future," said Alissandra Pacheco, an 8-year-old from Public School 29 in Brooklyn.

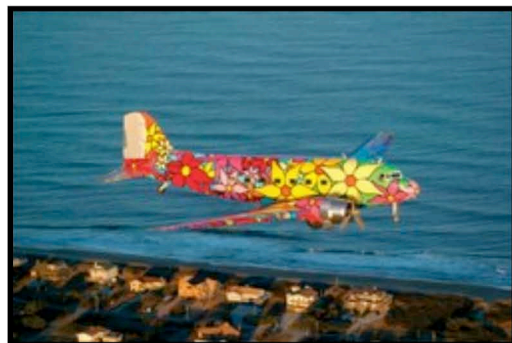
"And you can make everything more colorful," said her partner, Felicity Machado, a second grader from nearby PS 261.

Across the nation, children just like these have swapped fistfuls of problems for paintbrushes, participating in one of the public arts projects sponsored by Portraits of Hope. By turning icons of a city into giant canvases, children aren't just expressing themselves artistically, they're also learning about important social issues. And they're discovering how to collaborate and effect change in life just as they do in art.

"Kids can say, 'I did that' and have the first major achievement of, we hope, many in their lives," said Bernie Massey, who, along with his brother, Ed, founded the organization in Los Angeles in 1995.



Portraits of Hope's past projects include the largest passenger blimp in the country. (Courtesy of Portraits of Hope)



Another Portraits of Hope project was this DC3 airplane flown around Kittyhawk, NC on the centenary of the first flight. (Courtesy of Portraits of Hope)



Racecars in several states sported the familiar Portraits of Hope design. (Jim Redman/Courtesy of Portraits of Hope)

As children learn how to use art as a vehicle for change in their own lives, they are making a remarkable change in their own communities.

In 2000, more than 35,000 children in the Beverly Hills, Calif., area transformed a city building into a tower of hope. In 2003, children in more than 10 states painted segments of a design that was assembled and plastered onto a DC3 airplane flown around Kitty Hawk, N.C., to commemorate the centenary of the first flight. And two years ago, another project ended with four NASCAR racing cars bearing colorful shape designs zipping through raceways in Texas, Delaware, Tennessee, California and Arizona.

Getting each project started can be a challenge. “None of these things, politically, are easy,” Bernie Massey said. Local leaders are approached first, and many are reluctant to allow groups of children to create a project with such high visibility in the community. But thanks to the success of past programs, Portraits of Hope has some gravitas.

Once the backing of politicians is secured, the next step is financing the project. Portraits of Hope is a registered nonprofit and receives some grant money, Massey said. The rest, he said, comes from contributions from corporations. A paid staff and ever-changing group of volunteers then guide the projects toward completion.

Once the operation has a green light, the paint starts flowing in one of two forms: brightly colored flowers or shapes. The brothers chose flowers because they noticed they were one of the most common things drawn by children and were “a universally recognized symbol of hope, beauty, healing and joy.” And the shapes lend themselves easily to metaphors that enhance the educational component of the projects. Children learn how to “shape the future.”

The process involves participation in both art and education. In New York, the elementary school students wrote down a social problem that concerned them the most and what they would want to be



First graders Jose Martinez (left) and Jacob Urena share a few laughs while taking a break. (Kevin Livelli/CNS)



Kids paint a representation of a social issue important to them on models of the bigger project. (Kevin Livelli/CNS)



Educators, parents and volunteers often join in the fun. (Kevin Livelli/CNS)



when they grew up. Then they painted a representation of that issue or aspiration on a model taxi they got to take home, before moving on to the big flower panels meant for the real taxis. One group included future doctors, baseball players, police officers--even a future president.

The participants can be of any age, but are typically children from school or hospital programs who might be regarded as facing a challenge, be it physical, emotional or socio-economic.

The idea to mix art and education stemmed from the backgrounds of the two brothers, who became founders and producers of the projects. Bernie Massey, who declined to give his age, is a writer and a producer of socio-political and public education projects. His brother, Ed, 43, is a visual artist and children's book author.

The impact of this unique combination of education and art on the lives of the children has caught the eye of parents, teachers, health care professionals and artists.

"The increase in the children's self-esteem is evident," said Helen Landgarten, founder of the Clinical Art Therapy master's program at Loyola Marymount University in Los Angeles.

"It has been heart-warming to witness the children in the hospital participate in an educational, socialization and self-expressive experience," said Landgarten, a pioneer in the field. "Many laugh and admit their amazement of what they had accomplished."

There was no shortage of laughter among the elementary school children working in New York on the latest project. When the colorful taxis roll in New York this fall, yet another urban icon will have been transformed into a mobile canvas. And children will know when they see the taxis in motion that they have been "vehicles of change" in their own community.

Jose Martinez and Jacob Urena, both first graders from Brooklyn, might not understand all that yet, but the process has planted the right seeds.



Anyone can participate in a Portraits of Hope project. (Courtesy of Portraits of Hope)



Portraits of Hope mixes visual art and social issues awareness. (Courtesy of Portraits of Hope)



In the fall of 2007, nearly 12,700 New York City taxis will sport a new look courtesy of hundreds of children. (Courtesy of Portraits of Hope)

Jose, a self-described future pastor, said he learned about caring for people, as did Jacob. “Sometimes I help Jose paint and sometimes he helps me paint. That’s how good friends we are,” Jacob said, streaks of hot pink and yellow on his face.

“Yeah, we’re family!” Jose said, brimming with the giggles, before he shot like a dart across the room to show the others his masterpiece. “And we’re artists!” another voice chimed in.

With projects like these, they can be both.