

PORTRAITS OF HOPE

NYC TAXIS HARNESS FLOWERPOWER FOR GOOD CAUSE

By Ruby Mellen
CONTRIBUTING WRITER

Public art has rapidly seeped from our city streets and splashed "hood" first onto New York City's public transportation.

Portraits of Hope, an organization that helps disabled and sick children participate in public art projects, has taken a new exhibit titled "Garden in Transit" to our city.

Its gallery space? Taxicabs. Many of our familiar yellow vehicles are now sporting colorful floral patterns.

Schools and hospitals all over New York have been participating in the painting, decorating, and organizing of the project. It is not only hospitalized children that participate, but also students and other volunteers.

When a group attends Portraits of Hope's volunteer headquarters, it is divided into two halves. While one half paints the giant stickers for the taxis (the organization even fashioned special painting shoes for those unable to use their arms), the other half attends a workshop to discuss social, political, and environmental issues that strike them as important.

The volunteer work is most important for these children—not only does it get them actively participating with the art, it also pushes them to discuss and become involved in problematic issues in the United States.

The ubiquitous taxicabs also make wonderful advertisements for Portraits of Hope. Since most people are not sure exactly what they are or mean, they get curious and do research on the organization. Additionally, the painted cabs' interiors feature a small write-up of Portraits of Hope that mentions its website for more information.

The most beautiful result of "Garden in Transit," however, is not the taxis. It is having these hospital-bound children who too often have not felt needed or appreciated get to make a difference in the city. These children have the chance to participate in something that has brightened up our lives, turned heads left and right, and caused many rushed, impatient faces to turn up in smiles.

Want to get involved in "Garden in Transit"? It's a fun way to paint and learn as well as make a difference in the community. Visit www.portraitsofhope.org in order to become a volunteer.



Behind the Scenes with Founder Ed Massey

By Tarara Deane-Krantz
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Despite the hot and humid temperature one September afternoon in Union Square, Ed Massey, a 43-year-old blonde from California, wears black jeans and a black shirt. Yet his outfit is not quite the typical New York uniform: it is covered colorful floral patches that represent his organization, Portraits of Hope.

Massey founded Portraits of Hope with his brother, Bernie. The California-based organization is the one responsible for the enlarged rainbow flowers gracing the hoods and trunks of our city's taxicabs.

In discussion, Massey is quick to point out the main difference between previous public art projects that have changed New York's cityscape, such as the Christo and Jeanne-Claude's Gates, and his own. "Our project is all about the people. It's public art by the kids," he says with excitement.

In 1995, Ed Massey and his older brother Bernie founded Portraits of Hope to help children in schools, hospitals, and after-school programs across the United States and the world, vastly transform the environments around them through art. The kids use stencils to paint flowers on blimps, buildings, airplanes, and, in New York City, on taxis.

The New York City taxi project, called "Garden in Transit," has been in the works for seven years, since Rudolph Giuliani was mayor. Its implementation, however, began in early September and will end in December, a time period that coincides with the taxicabs' centennial in New York City.

"In these first 12 days we've gotten at least 3,000 taxis," says Massey. And he is expecting more. "We have this incredible window," Massey elaborates, discussing the opportunity to put

the vinyl sheets on all of New York City's 13,000 cabs before December. "We may not get the flowers on every cab, but if we don't, it won't be because the kids haven't painted enough of them," he says with pride.

Massey's mission, to cover most, if not all, of the cabs in New York City by December has gotten off to a rough start. The project's launch coincided with the recent taxi strike over forced implementation of GPS systems in cabs and costly new logos for the Taxi and Limousine Commission.

"In the beginning, the cab

government agency. Even the funding for Portraits of Hope comes from private foundations.

Massey believes that taxi drivers are an integral part of the project, as they choose whether or not to have the flowers on their cabs. The application of the flowers takes seven and a half minutes, but, once the clock is ticking, it is hard to get drivers to stop for even that short amount of time.

This means that Massey and his team must go to idling zones at airports and garages to catch the taxis during their breaks. Massey lauds drivers' participation,



New York City Taxis proudly display Massey's project "Garden in Transit."

drivers thought that we were part of the government," says Massey with a sigh. "The first few days we would just stand there at JFK airport in front of thousands of cabs with a blow horn saying, 'We are Portraits of Hope. We are 'Garden in Transit.' This is all voluntary, free, and optional.'"

Massey stresses the project's collaboration with cab drivers and its status as a grassroots campaign, not connected to any

calling their vehicles "museums on wheels" and referring to them as "ambassadors." Drivers will be able to keep the paneling once the project is over and Massey hopes that they will take the opportunity to treasure their part in a historic project.

For now, garnering support from cab drivers is Massey's main concern. The surprising lack of press surrounding "Garden in Transit" doesn't faze him. "The

press is important only to get the word out that it's done by kids," says Massey with utmost sincerity surprising of an artist who has done public, high-profile projects around the world. "If someone thinks that the flowers are graphically produced, it squashes seven years of effort and it squashes this incredible salute to kids," he remarks.

And while Massey admits that the lack of media attention frustrates some Portraits in Hope workers, he encourages patience. "If things are meant to happen, they'll happen," he recites with a smile.

Although Massey prefers to focus on the behind-the-scenes efforts of the over 23,000 New York City children who painted the flowers, he is also enthusiastic about the visual effect of the cabs, especially in the coming winter. "It's a cheerful project," he says. "In the busy life of New Yorkers, hopefully the sight of the flowers will be a little escape and promote happiness."

Tommy Engelhardt, a volunteer for "Garden in Transit" project who stands on a corner of Union Square handing out information flyers, sees another upside to the flowers. "It's a chance to dispel the myth that New Yorkers aren't involved," he says. "This project has shown them to be a great group of motivated people." Engelhardt, along with most "Garden in Transit" volunteers, has just finished college and is excited to be a part of the Massey brothers' public art project.

"Garden in Transit" has an educational component as well. Children who participate in the painting also attend educational sessions during which they discuss what they want to be a vehicle of change by painting miniature taxis. Massey proudly displays pictures of children in New York City public schools holding up cabs with anti-gun signs and go-green motifs. "This might be the children's first chance to speak publicly and be able to look at something big and say 'I was a part of that,'" he explains.

In terms of plans for the future, Massey believes that Garden in Transit can start a trend. "If people recognize that kids can get involved in high profile projects, we will see other projects like this in other regions of the world," he predicts with characteristic optimism. But for now, Massey looks forward to working on smaller scale projects and moving back home with his family once "Garden in Transit" wraps up in December. He does his own artwork and confesses that he enjoys smaller projects with less red tape.

But temporarily changing the façade of the iconic yellow taxi in New York City is not the last step for the Massey brothers' public art. "Wherever we're invited, we'll go," he says. But that night Massey was busy—he and his crew of volunteers were going to spend midnight to 6 A.M. in garages trying to get taxi drivers to volunteer their cabs for the project between shifts.