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Palisadian Plants Seeds for NYC's 'Garden in Transit'

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Associate Editor

First it was a plane. Then a blimp. Now, the iconic New York City yellow taxi will soar in a Technicolor dream coat of vibrant flowers painted by children from all over the globe. The project, called "Garden in Transit," was spearheaded by Pacific Palisades resident and artist Ed Massey through his nonprofit Portraits of Hope.

Massey and his brother Bernie started Portraits of Hope in 1995 as a creative therapy program for hospitalized and physically disabled children, and the program has expanded to include both children and adults who participate through various community programs and institutions. Helen and Peter Bing were the first major sponsors.

With "Garden in Transit," New York will celebrate the 100th anniversary of its first metered taxi. The mobile public art exhibit—one of the largest of its kind in the city—will brighten the streets of New York from September through December 2007.

"In the 100 years of the yellow taxi, this has never been done," Massey told the *Palisadian-Post*.

About 50,000 children, mostly from the New York metropolitan area, will participate in the painting, which is scheduled to begin next month and will last about a year. They will paint flowers on self-adhesive vinyl that will then be applied to the roofs and trunks of just under 13,000 taxicabs.

"The beauty of it is that it's transportable," Massey said of the 700,000 sq. ft. of material they plan to use. Portraits of Hope plans to take the project to children at two facilities (hospitals, schools and community institutions) in every state, as well as Puerto Rico and the Dominican Republic. People in the home countries of some of the New York taxi drivers, such as Pakistan, will also have the chance to participate.

Volunteers bring all of the equipment—paint, brushes and music—to the children. Hospitalized children who are wheelchair-bound use a special telescope brush to paint their sections. Others who are unable to paint with their hands use a shoe paintbrush or a brush with fruit-flavored wrap that is held between their teeth.

"It really is one of those fantastic projects, to see the energy

that the kids will have," said Massey, a painter and contemporary sculptor who also writes children's books. "It's wonderful seeing people get together and work on something that they can point to and say, 'I did that.'"

Portraits of Hope also teaches children about reaching for goals by leading a discussion prior to the actual painting. "We get their hands moving and their educational juices flowing," Massey said.

Massey's inspiration for Portraits of Hope began when he was invited to do a reading for his book "Milton" at a children's hospital. "That was my first introduction to the pediatric care unit. I saw that these kids were painting and drawing in somewhat isolated situations."

Around the same time, he noticed that the Tower of Hope, an oil rig on Olympic in Beverly Hills, "was falling apart visually." Massey realized that hospitalized children could paint flowers as a cover for the rig if he could bring the walls of the structure to them. The result is a whimsical tower of flowers that stands as a symbol of hope and beauty amidst the city buildings.

Massey brought one of his large-scale painting projects home to the Palisades last year with Soaring Dreams, a huge blimp co-sponsored by Ameritrust Mortgage Company. Children ages 4 to 18, including Palisades Jewish Early Childhood Center preschoolers and Marquez School third graders, painted pieces of the colorful airship, which debuted over the Santa Monica Pier.

"All of the projects I'm involved in are very family-oriented," said Massey, whose wife, Dawn, is a lyricist who writes the music for the projects. They have two children, Felix, 6, and Georgi, 2-1/2. The Portraits of Hope projects give parents and family members a chance to paint with the children.

The cheerful colors that will grow on the New York City taxicabs include fuchsia and lavender, teal and magenta, as well as various yellows, reds and oranges.

"I just think it's going to be an absolutely spectacular visual experience for the world to see," Massey said. "The sea of yellow is going to become truly a colorful city. These colors are just going to pop right out of the concrete."

The installation will require 12,000 people hours in the first three weeks of September, which Massey says will be a 24-hour



Artist Ed Massey and his wife, Dawn, with their children Felix and Georgi. Massey recruited students with physical ailments from an inclusion program in South Los Angeles to help him paint the panels for this installation, called *Syncopation*, opposite the Kirk Douglas Theatre in Culver City. They all painted with mops, which produce huge brush strokes. "We wanted it to look like a canvas," Massey said.

Rich Schmitt/Staff Photographer

operation and will not require the taxi drivers to stop working. "It's almost like a pit stop because drivers can't lose money."

Portraits of Hope chose New York because of the verticality of the city. "It made perfect sense to have this moving cityscape—a kaleidoscope of colors," Massey said.

"Garden in Transit" has been in the works for more than six years, during which time Massey met with city officials—initially with Mayor Rudy Giuliani and then with his successor, Mayor Michael R. Bloomberg. New York City has welcomed public art events that bring people together, ranging from displays at City Hall Park to Christo and Jeanne Claude's "The Gates," but approving a change in color of the city's signature cab was not a simple process.

"It's like saying, 'Let's have the Eiffel Tower painted,'" Massey said. "It's an icon and they're protective of icons."

The Masseys will move to New



A view from above illustrates how New York City taxicabs will be transformed into works of art on the move.

York City for about a year and a half to facilitate the project, but plan to return to the Palisades at the end of that time. Both native Palisadians, Ed and Dawn were neighbors when they were both preschoolers and met again years later.

"All our friends want to come to New York and work on the pro-

ject," Dawn said, adding that they also are going to incorporate some of the Palisades children.

To learn how to volunteer for, sponsor or donate to a project, visit www.portraitsofhope.com.