

Art Center creates dreams on Sedgwick corridor



Founder Charlie Branda in front of part of the Sentrack mural.



"Before I Die" blackboards have been created in over 70 countries.

Interactive public art project invites locals to share aspirations

STORY AND PHOTOS BY JIM MATUSIK

There's a lot happening on Old Town's Sedgwick Corridor these days thanks to the ambitious vision of Charlie Branda and the art center that she has created.

Art on Sedgwick, 1429 N. Sedgwick, is a not-for-profit organization designed to enliven the neighborhood and provide a creative open environment for all to enjoy.

"We believe that everyone here matters," says Branda. "That diversity is an asset that connects people with the best part of themselves."

The art center is in a temporary space now, but will soon occupy two storefronts in the historic Marshall Field Garden Apartments across the street, purchased last year by Related Midwest and currently going through

"There are many forces in society that create divisions between people and drive them apart," says Branda. "We want to use art to draw our neighborhood together."

different stages of renovation. The property, built in 1929, consists of 10 buildings that take up two entire city blocks. Now families are excited about having a safe space for their kids in the form of an innovative art center and are giving their feedback about what sort of art classes would be exciting for their kids.

The center has its third annual Faces and Places art exhibit entitled "You Make This Place Beautiful" last Friday and the crowded opening showcased the artwork of many of its members. "This powerful exhibit draws together students, family and community members under a single dialogue to encourage a shared imagination for beauty and hope in our neighborhood," says Branda.

The Center has wasted no time making its mark on the street. Passersby are first greeted by a giant chalkboard entitled "Before I

Die" that was created on a boarded up storefront originally plastered with Iron Maiden posters.

The original concept is from artist Candy Chang who envisioned it as an interactive public art project that invites people to share their personal aspirations in public.

She created the first blackboard on an abandoned building in her neighborhood after losing someone very close to her.

The project has since gained global attention and one thousand "Before I Die" blackboards have been created in over 70 countries.

The idea for Art on Sedgwick was also inspired by a death.

There was a shooting in front of Brandas' house on Evergreen and Sedgwick where a young man was killed. Revealed later to be a gang shooting between local Mickey Cobras and their rivals the Gangster Disciples, the irony was that the victim wasn't a gang member at all, but just caught in the crossfire while going for milk.

At that same time Branda was reading a book called "Make The Impossible Possible" by Bill Strickland. Bill had an epiphany in a ceramics class when he saw how he could create something beautiful out of a lump of dirt and it made him realize that life held more possibilities than he had previously imagined. Later, he created a world-class art center in his neighborhood in Pittsburgh.

Branda had been a commercial banker for 16 years and spent part of that time in a specialized division responsible for banking not-for-profit organizations.

The shooting, the message in the book, and her own NPO experience stirred a conviction within her. "I decided then to create a non-profit art center to inject creative energy and a shared imagination for hope into the neighborhood," she says.

If you are in the area, you are invited to add your own dream to the Sedgwick blackboard.

Just down the street a massive mural by popular local street artist Joseph "Sentrack" Perez explodes off the wall of another abandoned storefront in a blaze of colors.

"Students had input into



Student artwork at the opening.

what they wanted to say to the neighborhood and how the mural should communicate the message," says Branda. "Students from Walter Payton College Prep worked on the project along with Sentrack to complete the vision."

Sentrack migrated to Chicago from Phoenix three years ago and his vibrant and striking style quickly captured the local art eye. He has evolved from a graffiti artist into a muralist and gallery artist and his "Birdboy" character can be seen in other murals around the city.

"Growing up in the 'hood it was like I was surrounded by gangs," says Sentrack, "and it was like, if I just keep focused on art, that's all I care about, and as long as I'm not on drugs and I am not in prison, I was like man, I'm doing good with my life."

His mural is painted on what is the back of the Noble Horse theater one street east on Orleans. The stable was built in 1871 but is

now in poor condition after being set on fire by radical animal rights activists. It now has a future date with the wrecking ball. It, like the old Tipre Hardware building on North Ave., will be replaced by multiple stories of gleaming glass and steel that seem to make little sense in this historic Old Town neighborhood.

Creativity is the opposite of destruction and at least creative consciousness will prevail and thrive in two brand new storefronts on the Sedgwick Corridor.

"There are many forces in society that create divisions between people and drive them apart," says Branda. "We want to use art to draw our neighborhood together."

You can visit Art on Sedgwick's informative website at artonsedgwick.org. There you can learn about the different classes, upcoming events, or information about becoming a part of this thriving art community.



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