

Remaking Buffalo one wall at a time

When UB graduate Kimberley Moore looks at the Broadway Market downtown, she sees more than blank walls - she sees a chance to revitalize the community with art.

In February, Buffalo Mayor Byron Brown named 2008 the "Year of the Arts" during his State of the City address. More recently, AmericanStyle magazine named Buffalo the number one mid-sized art city in the country.

Moore began the Buffalo Mural Arts Program as an internship project while at UB. This summer, the program will pay for the creation of seven murals on buildings of businesses on Buffalo's East Side. These murals will reflect the identity of the City of Buffalo with the support of Common Council President David Franczyk.

"We're really interested in city beautification and having a more positive image for Buffalo. Everyone thinks it's just snow and losing sports teams," said Moore, who is the program coordinator and project manager.

One of the program goals is to bring more people into downtown Buffalo.

"There have been studies by other successful programs that shows that murals increase revenue for local businesses, and more visitors interested in cultural tourism and residents come to the area," Moore said.

On the other hand, Mark Byrnes, a junior architect major, would rather see economic redevelopment.

"I don't really care for murals to mask the despair or decay of a place. It's more important to work on economic development, eliminating abandoned houses and reusing vacant spaces into good public spaces for the community," Byrnes said.

The first mural will be painted on the building at 1105 Broadway St. The chosen mural is titled "B-lo Looks Up" and will show Buffalo's past and future, according to Moore. Iconic architectural aspects of the city such as the silos, wind turbines and Peace Bridge will be combined with portraits of influential people from the area, like jazz musician Charles Gale and the Goo Goo Dolls.

Erik Minter, the artist who designed "B-lo Looks Up," is originally from Washington, DC and has worked with sculptors and graffiti in the past.

"There's something nice about Buffalo that people don't see from the outside," Minter said. "Broadway is sort of at a low point, and there's so much potential for revival. Murals that are bright and have positive messages will help...give people something different to experience."

The second installment of the murals entitled the "Faces of Buffalo," will be painted on the interior of the Broadway Market. The collection features diverse portraits of people in the area with an international theme.

The works are ultimately chosen based on surveys conducted in the community, according to Moore. The program's Board of Directors narrows the choices down to three submissions. Then members bring the choices to the streets to ask random people on the streets which one they prefer.

Other buildings that have agreed or volunteered to have murals painted on their walls include Al Cohen's Famous Rye Bread bakery, Duch Builders Supply, Inc. and the old FWS building.

"The community is larger than most people realize," Moore said about what the mural will show viewers when it is complete.

Most muralists will be local professional artists. Area students also have submitted works, according to Moore.

"We have a wide variety of local artists. We have some graphic designers, some experienced muralists and some others that just specialize in painting," she said. "They're all individual works, but all of them have to do with Buffalo and what it means to people."

Depending on the success of this year's mural program, it could extend to future years.

"We would like it to [continue], depending on the popularity," Moore said.

Minter, the artist, thinks people often misinterpret the reasoning behind murals.

"People think that if you put a mural up, it signifies a depressed area, but I think people have that wrong...it's another way to attract tourism," Minter said.

Fundraisers will benefit the artists painting the murals and the City of Buffalo. Up until now, mostly local businesses of the community have been feeding the project. The Walt Disney Company has donated theme park tickets to be auctioned off to bring funds for the project.

The program also includes plans to develop the areas around the murals by creating green spaces.

"We're working on changing over the vacant lot and places around the mural into green spaces," Moore said.

Students and community members are welcome to participate in many aspects of the mural project.

"UB students can submit a design proposal, or volunteer to help out. We're looking for volunteers for basically everything," Moore said.

