

On Women Leaders and the Bryn Mawr Project

Jane Golden 02 January 2011

As an artist and activist, I believe seriously in the social power of art and the history we build on as we sketch out and ultimately lay claim to our own place on the continuum of creative solutions. For nearly three decades, first as part of the Philadelphia Anti-Graffiti Network and later as head of the Mural Arts Program, I have had the privilege to witness the unique ability of ordinary individuals to use the collaborative power of art-making to tap into the collective imagination of this city, lift people up, challenge their neighbors to think beyond their own door, and unite disparate populations in the creation of meaningful images that promote hope, cooperation, peace, and civic awareness.

Philadelphia has always been a city whose riches persist in people and their stories. What we have seen from the very beginning of Mural Arts is that if people are given an opportunity to envision, to work together, to express their individual truths in the language of their own creative imaginations – they will become aware of the common concerns that unite us and our shared capacity to take action not only out of our own interests but also in the interest of the greater good.

But how did we get here? Who were the leaders and heroes whose tremendous energy smoothed the rough road we now traverse? How did this movement start and how is its legacy sustained? How do we pay tribute to those who came before us, those whose noble efforts loom large and inspire a greater urgency in our work? How do we return the favor, and push the envelope in a way that will inspire the next generation of leaders?

During the early years, as Mural Arts was growing into its role as an arts organization attuned to the social fabric of our city, many of my mentors and role-models were strong women. They were tough and courageous block captains and community leaders, dedicated to their neighbors and their neighborhood, driven to improve the lives of those around them. They were tenacious and humble in perfect harmony. They were mothers and grandmothers, healers and teachers, all guiding me into the work I continue to do today. They helped us navigate the early years of working in this city and furnished our work with their advice and wisdom.

These amazing women were all fed up with what they saw within their neighborhoods: the paucity of city services over the years, the graffiti, the vacant lots, and empty, decaying buildings. Somehow, instead of being overwhelmed by a sense of defeat from seeing a community beset by seemingly insurmountable problems, they chose to see the potential that remained alive within it. They longed for beauty, and they saw murals as a way

to turn blight into beauty and — more importantly, they saw the art itself as a vehicle for telling the important stories of their lives.

Very often the magnitude of the problems at hand coupled with a sense of powerlessness leads us to believe that a personal investment in curing the ills of our communities is not worth the cost. These women taught me that it is worth the fight. They taught me a steadfastness I have put to use throughout my entire professional life, one that has enabled me to persist in spite of incredible obstacles and frustrations. If they could do it, I have always told myself, if they could push the boulder up the mountain, why can't I?

As I write, we are embarking on a series of mural projects that celebrate women in a variety of leadership roles — projects that commemorate the past while encouraging young women today to take the lead. One of the most exciting of these new projects is our collaboration with a group of students at Bryn Mawr College on a project that, in conjunction with a year-long celebration of the 125th anniversary of the school, will pay tribute to the role of women as educators, artists, activists, and role models. The mural, which will be installed on the Philadelphia District Health Center at 4400 Haverford Avenue, is being created by artist Shira Walinsky along with Bryn Mawr students, staff, and alumni, seniors from a local nursing home, women who work at the health center, people from local community groups, and some remarkable students

from Parkway West High School.

The mural honors those who have opened the door and will serve to inspire those who follow them through it to the next opportunities. It invites us to see our own role in viewing history as less linear timeline and more a complex, nuanced, and overlapping storyline.

While the mural is in the early stages, with much design work and painting still ahead, the level of excitement at the community meeting was palpable. Strangers were coming together with creativity, imagination, and a merging sense of history and future. Driving home from that meeting I felt so moved and so hopeful for what lies ahead. I felt inspired by the faces of people young and old that lit up in flickers of creative energy and surging moments of common purpose, just as I am inspired each day anew by resilient community leaders, past, present, and future — the women I met with many years ago, the leaders who inspire me today, and the wonderful students and young people who will one day lead the way.

When I reflect on those women I met back when I began this work, coupled with strong women leaders and mentors I have had since then and the young women in my life today — in our programs at Mural Arts and in the classrooms where I teach — I realize that they have all collectively given me a certain gift. They have given me a sense of purpose and hope, determination and vision, that we can make our neighborhoods healthy, creative, and

cooperative places to live and that these pillars must be accessible for everyone. I am more certain than ever that art has a place in the foreground of this social movement and that women of the past, present, and future have a strong role at the heart of it.

For more information about Mural Arts and the variety of programs they offer, visit www.muralarts.org or contact Jane Golden at jane.golden@muralarts.org.