



Community creates massive mural declaring Wy'east to be a 'zona libre'

SIGNATURES of student artists form feathers in the wings of the eagles.

Story and Photos by KIRBY NEUMANN-REA
News editor

The largest mural in Hood River County faces west on the back of the historic grandstands at Wy'east Middle School — a community facility used year-round for the county fair and other events, and recreation including soccer and Ultimate Frisbee.

There are actually two murals, both giving a prevention message; the main one on the west side of the grandstands and a smaller one on the east.

Anyone can go and see the murals, and is encouraged to do so, as it is the product of hundreds of hours of volunteer labor from July 10-23. A total of 323 students had a hand in the project.

Artist Allison Bell Fox designed the mural and guided her students and adult helpers in the execution (and some design changes along the way).

The murals are comprised of 60 panels painted individually and assembled as big pictures.

Step way back and take it all in, but step up close to see the important details: Every student wrote his or her name in the shape of a wing feather (and the teachers' names are on the tail feathers).

Hood River County Commission on Children and Families and Wy'east Middle School collaborated, along with other local agencies, and the Hood River County School District Summer School program, to create what county prevention coordinator Belinda Ballah calls "a message on a grand scale."

"It's all about encouraging people to 'soar above the influence,'" said Ballah, who advises the middle- and high school Health Media clubs, which helped plan and create the Wy'east murals.

Health Media students do prevention education and outreach efforts all year, in part using the national Above the Influence campaign, whose circle-arrow symbol forms a prominent part of the west mural.

("Anything that makes you less than you is not for you," is one motto of Above the Influence.)

Two eagles and Mount Hood dominate the mural, but its message is delivered by a young girl piloting an airplane pulling a banner with the words:

"Proud to be an alcohol-free zone/ All day every day/alcohol, tobacco, drugs, smoke and weapons"

"Orgullosos de ser una zona libre de alcohol, tabaco, drogas, humo y armas"

Fox and high school and adult helpers oversaw the painting of 60 panels, each measuring 4 by 6 feet: 48 for the west-facing mural, and 12 for the linear "eagle eye" mural on the east side.

Fox attended Parkdale Elementary and graduated from Hood River Valley High School in 2000. She attended University of Montana and now works as a graphic designer and also manages a gym.

Here is an interview with Fox, condensed for brevity:

HRN: This was a big undertaking. How did the projects go?

Fox: It's been amazing, considering we had to work on 60 panels.

But we had 12 kids who were middle school and high school age who helped from 7:30 to 2:30, and at 2 p.m. we had three classes of summer school kids who rotated for 45-minute periods.

(Two of those helpers, Amanda and Rosa Rodriguez of Parkdale, were recognized at the Aug. 14 school board meeting; see Aug. 16 edition. Amanda and Rosa got on a bus all 13 days of the project and spent all day helping.)

My helpers prepped the kids for a whirlwind of activity. At first it was chaos, but then we pre-planned sections they could help get ready to go.

HRN: There's a lot going on with this mural.

Fox: We had some required elements that had to be there, that (Principal) Catherine Dalbey asked us to include. We started gathering them three weeks before the project started.

HRN: What were some of the other elements?

Fox: We had to have Hood River valley, Mount Hood, the Eagle mascot, and the Above the Influence symbol.

Everything inside the symbol is sunset colors and everything outside of it is normal colors.

You have kids are soaring in the sky, on eagles, above the influence. There is a 7-foot eagle at one end, and 40-foot eagle in the foreground.

The airplane is whimsical. It was a question of "How do you figure out how to have that many letters?"

HRN: How did you actually plan out the 48 panels in the main mural?

Fox: I did all the prep on my laptop, including the images that had to be there, and kind of adjusted and revised it, and got everything into perspective, rather than doing 200 separate drawings.

HRN: What was it like to be back home for this project?

Fox: It's so good to be back in Hood River valley. This is the third project I've done (locally). It's awesome. I did a mural with (teacher) Carol Birdsell on the top floor of Hood River Middle School in 2012 with her after-school program, and I was the "fun hour" during state testing, at HRMS last spring.

Through Columbia Gorge Arts in Education, I get contracts for little fun projects, or big fun projects. I schedule my graphic design so I can take on these projects.

I saw my high school art teacher, Mr. (Steve) Labadie, he came and said hi, and it was nice to see him, and I run into old faces. They don't always know me right away, but they know my mom (Jeannette Whitesides) as a teacher, then they recognize me.

HRN: You're leaving a pretty big legacy here.

Fox: The majority of it is the kids. I helped make it happen. It's cool, I hope the community enjoys it and the soccer players; they're the ones who get to stare at it. We knew we had to include the soccer element.

This is a giant do-not-bring-your-beer-to-



ARTIST Allison Bell Fox, who grew up in Parkdale and graduated from Hood River Valley High School in 2000.

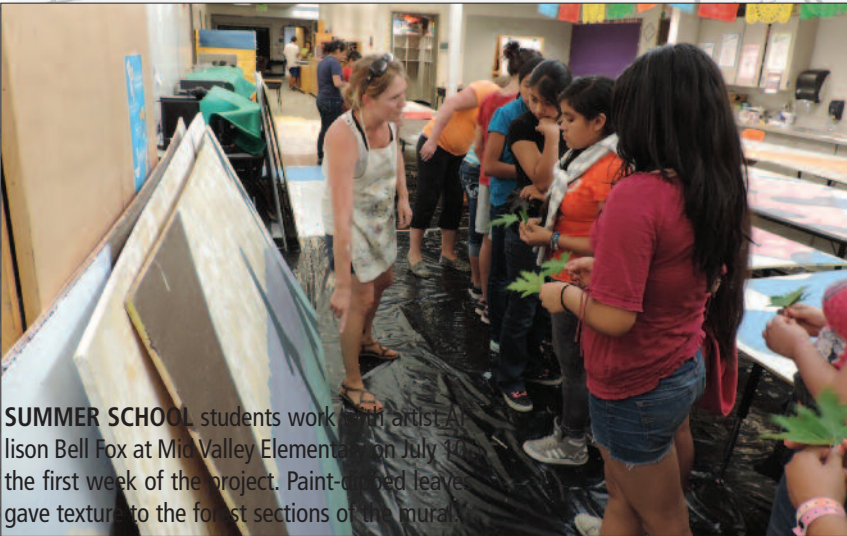
Wy'east campus because it is a tobacco- and alcohol-free zone.

HRN: Many of the same messages you heard when you were in school are still being conveyed.

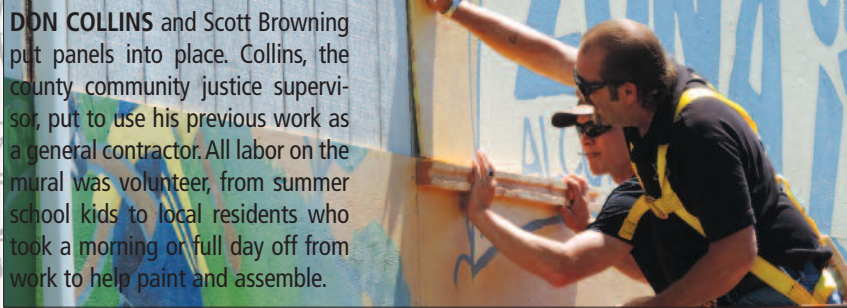
Fox: It's one of those things where, the battle will probably never go away. You just make the most cheerful environment you can for the kids, and you give people the opportunities to take the right direction, with as few distractions as possible.

The fact that I got to do this at the middle school level is awesome, that I got to impart a bit of art and head them in the right direction.

I had some hard workers, every day. I had some rock-solid kids. While I was as over here they were over there scrubbing paint off the elementary school floor. They put in some long hours, and they improvised on the spot when needed. It was a great opportunity for them and a great opportunity for me, and it gave a feeling of connectedness.



SUMMER SCHOOL students work with artist Allison Bell Fox at Mid Valley Elementary on July 14, the first week of the project. Paint-colored leaves gave texture to the forest sections of the mural.



DON COLLINS and Scott Browning put panels into place. Collins, the county community justice supervisor, put to use his previous work as a general contractor. All labor on the mural was volunteer, from summer school kids to local residents who took a morning or full day off from work to help paint and assemble.

EAGLE EYE: Close-up of the 12-panel mural on the west side of the stadium.



EAGLE and young rider, in progress.

