

Suburban Life Article

Mural turns 'ugly' underpass into a masterpiece

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Before Diego Andrade joined Youth Crossroads last summer, he mostly kept to himself. He was an introvert, a shy, "quiet kid" who was unaware of his skills, charisma or inner strength.

In front of a small crowd that gathered on the night of Oct. 3, Andrade talked of how lending a hand to transform the Berwyn underpass into an art piece taught him about himself and the meaning behind community. Throughout the project, the 15-year-old Andrade led a team of middle schoolers, which offered him the chance to step up, set an example and become a leader.

"I learned that I can actually put myself out there," said Andrade, a sophomore at Morton East High School, as he reflected on his experience during the ribbon-cutting, which unveiled a massive, multi-colored mural that covered the underpass on 30th Place and Oak Park Avenue near the PavYMCA in Berwyn.

The effort was spearheaded by [Youth Crossroads](#), a Berwyn-based nonprofit dedicated to serving teens and adolescents across the neighborhood and nearby Cicero. Staff from Youth Crossroads and Sandro Murillo, an artist and middle school teacher from Chicago, began the project for the underpass last year and returned this summer to finish the work.

The results cast a light on Youth Crossroads' many partnerships with area groups such as Berwyn South School District 100, the Berwyn Park District and the city of Berwyn. More than 60 youths came out to convert the once "ugly" underpass into a masterpiece, plastered in bright paint, fun patterns and positive messages, said Joel Wallen, youth development programs director for Youth Crossroads. It took four weeks and about 200 hours to complete the task.

The ceremony comes on the heels of Youth Crossroads' most recent celebration. Last month, the organization, which has called Berwyn its home since 1974, opened the doors to its newest location at 6501 Stanley Ave.

Because Youth Crossroads hosts after-school programs and several counseling services, it often shares a space with other partnering groups, said Wallen and longtime Executive Director David Terrazino. Now, members of the Youth Crossroads team have a place of their own, where they can hold more events and sessions for families.

The pair of events opens up a new chapter for Youth Crossroads. Step by step, members of the longtime nonprofit work to make themselves visible within their communities. Briani Shorter, a youth leadership coordinator, said of the mural, "it was just an idea at first," and to "see it really manifest" left her speechless.

"This is really good," she said, adding that she hopes those driving by or walking through it can see the young people "reflected in this work."

Inside the underpass, one panel features an outline of a heart around the message, "life is powerful," while another reads, "believe in your dream." Some chose to highlight the important things in life such as love, family and friends, while others featured messages of kindness and compassion.

Kyle Addalia, another member of Youth Crossroads, said he remembered going to the park close to the underpass.

"That gray color there," said Addalia, 18, and a senior at Morton West High School, of the underpass' exterior, which is now underneath a blanket of blue polka dots against a yellow backdrop.

"There was paint chips everywhere, and it was just really dark and dreary," Addalia recalled. "Now there's life in it. There's inspiring messages, and it makes you feel like you're actually a part of the community."

"It does make me a little bit emotional," said Murillo, as he looked at the mural and then at the people, some of whom were school administrators and local officials who contributed their time to help make the mural possible.

"I really didn't have those experiences growing up," Murillo said. "I grew up in Texas. I grew up in the South, and I was involved in a lot of art-making processes, but it wasn't anything like this at a scale like this where it's public for everyone to see."

“I think that’s really amazing,” Murrillo added. “I like to think about the long-lasting impact it’ll have on young people and the community.”

After the ceremony, Andrade and Addalia walked through the underpass with the rest of their friends. With a skateboard in one hand, Andrade pulled out his cellphone to take pictures of the mural and remember the moment.

He pointed to one that showed off a flower, its purple petals stretching to the corner of the panel. “That flower represents growth,” he said, the perfect symbol that sums up his journey thus far.

