Mural Tells Visual Story of Chilton's History

By Darlene Buechel, Tri-County News

Chilton native James Barany has always had a love and appreciation of the arts.

As a young child he visited the Chilton Post Office with his grandfather, James Skarda, who served as beloved principal of Chilton High School for many years. A mural at the Post Office painted by muralist Charles Thwaites deeply influenced young Barany. "I clearly remember being lost in the image as I gazed upon it, trying to decode and understand it as a boy," Barany said.

Barany graduated from Chilton High School (CHS) in 1988 and went on to become a professor of art at the Milwaukee Institute of Art and Design—the same school that trained muralist Thwaites. During the summer of 2019, Thwaites' influence came full circle when Barany was asked to be lead artist and designer of historical murals for Chilton and nearby Stockbridge.

Barany worked with the Calumet County Historical Society (CCHS) using real historical photos and events and spent about four months going from a concept to a digital version for both murals. "The designs were then finalized by steering committees, members of CCHS, and approved by the building owners, helping to make sure the images reflected the ideas and history of each community in a progressive and tasteful manner," Barany explained.

32 feet by 55 feet

Drive down Main Street in Chilton (or better yet walk) and you will not miss the vibrant, colorful mural gracing the side of the building at 40 W. Main. The mural, about 32 feet high and 55 feet long, vividly depicts the history of Chilton. Four types of paint product were used including wall conditioner, primer (acrylic gesso), high-grade colorfast acrylic paint, and a durable protective sealant. About 12 gallons of each type of paint, or 48 gallons total, were used to complete the mural. Barany estimated the project took about 1,500 hours of work from research and design to painting the mural.

The images in the Chilton mural span 75 years—from 1840 through 1915—and paint a realistic picture of the growth of the city. Catherine Stanton, the matriarch of Chilton, is shown in front of the State Street bridge. Past the bridge people can see a grist mill—erected by the Stantons—which played a huge roll in Chilton's early development.

Members of a Ho-chunk family are depicted to the right of Catherine Stanton and two Civil War veterans, Harrison Hobart and George Breed, are shown on her left. Both men contributed a great deal to the City of Chilton's growth after their military service ended.

The former Hotel Chilton and St. Mary Parish are shown as backdrops and on the far right of the wall there is a sketch of the Chilton Malt House. The visuals in the center of the mural give a nod to agriculture with two local women raking hay and farmers admiring their new John Deere tractor.

It is interesting to note that the font used in "Chilton" was gleaned from a turn of the century ad and all photos used were based locally. As president of the CCHS for over 15 years, local businessman Terry Friederichs said he was excited to see the project take shape. "The Mural Project, along with all of the publicity it is creating, provides a wonderful opportunity to expand awareness and hopefully increase both Calumet County Society memberships and visitors to the CCHS Museum," Freiderichs said.

Friederichs was also quick to note that the Community Foundation-Bright Idea Fund, the Community Foundation, and the Wisconsin Arts Board were all instrumental in helping the CCHS make this project a reality.

Lead artist James Barany agreed that the project was truly a group effort. “This opportunity is a humbling gift from the community, the Fox Valley, and the State of Wisconsin; however, I truly feel this is my form of ‘service’ to the community,” Barany said. “Chilton helped shape my creative abilities and this is an ideal way for me to give back and engage the community.”

Bonding experience, too

The mural is not only a labor of love for Barany, but a family bonding experience since his daughter Emma Barany is one of five college interns who worked on the project. Emma, from the Brookfield/Waukesha area, is a student at the Maryland Institute College of Art. The other interns include Reagan Mulvely, Neenah, who attends the Milwaukee Institute of Art and Design (MIAD), as well as Claresa Waight and Julien Roberson, both from Miami, Florida, who also attend MIAD. The group of interns is rounded out by Olivia Bonlander, a 2018 graduate of Chilton High School who is attending the University of Wisconsin-Stout studying Art Education.

James Barany approached Olivia in 2018 to see if she would be interested in helping to paint historical murals. He explained the students would use a numbered grid system and paint the murals square by square. Barany said the challenge also would include projects in the Chilton and Stockbridge schools to teach students how to design and create murals of their own. Olivia said “yes” in a heartbeat. “It means the world to me that I get to be a part of this project. Considering I love working with kids, this opportunity will be an amazing experience,” Olivia said.

Chilton (population 3,814) is a city with a friendly, small-town vibe and Olivia considers herself lucky to have grown up in the country just 10 minutes from Chilton High. “I personally enjoyed attending a smaller school district because I still had the benefit of knowing everyone’s names in my grade,” Olivia explained. She also said living in a rural area had a huge impact on her work ethic. Farming has been a large part of her family life and she showed pigs at the Calumet County Fair until she was a junior in High School. Olivia said she worked three jobs to save money for college. One of the jobs was at Papa Don’s pizza place in Chilton where she has waitressed since her parents took over the business when Olivia was a high school sophomore. Now she works at Papa Don’s during college breaks and is also using her paid internship to help with college costs.

On May 21, 2019 Olivia began her internship with the Chilton mural project and was a fan of the project from day one. “I love painting at such a large scale,” she said. “I also love working with the other interns while also interacting with the community members that come by.”

James Barany said he also was excited about the project from the start when he said, “People are going to have fun watching the murals develop. We invite everyone to come and see the process.”

If you think that sounds like part of the joys of small town life you would be right. The next time you are in Chilton do not forget to check out the mural on Main. You might see a small child gazing with awe and wonder at the beautiful historical mural and plotting his or her artistic future—just like James Barany.

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