

The Wall of Welcome Project of the Brentwood & Crestview neighborhoods.

BACKGROUND

This project began in 2003 when artist Jean Graham presented her idea for doing a collaborative mosaic tile project to celebrate the neighborhood on an existing block-long brick wall flanking the Crestview Shopping Center on Woodrow Avenue. While the site had little visual appeal, the shopping center was functionally the heart of the neighborhood, and was frequented by many of the original residents. Her intent was to create a visual “destination” that would bring together the older & younger residents of Brentwood & Crestview, make visible the flavor & identity of the area, and celebrate its residents. The neighborhood responded favorably to the idea and under the leadership of Shayla Fleshman – who was the current Brentwood School PTA President – representatives of the neighborhood associations, churches, Lions Club, Optimist Club, boy scouts, etc. gathered together with Jean & several other artists to find a way to support the project. The group decided to create an annual Violet Crown Festival as a fund-raiser for the Wall of Welcome, and organized a non-profit organization called **Violet Crown Community Works** (VCCW) – dedicated to supporting community-building enhancements in the Brentwood & Crestview neighborhoods. While Jean Graham has directed & implemented the Wall of Welcome project, VCCW has provided the umbrella support and enabled much of the community networking and involvement. The VCCW currently has an 8-person Board of Directors and meets monthly.



IMPLEMENTATION

For five years, the Violet Crown Festival has been presented by dedicated volunteers, at Brentwood Park during the month of May. This festival has successfully energized the neighborhood community and has included live music, art booths, participatory activities, a silent auction, and a community tent, which displayed neighborhood history and other community projects. Many neighborhood businesses have donated money as sponsors, and numerous churches and groups have donated their time and support. Each year someone has volunteered to Chair the Festival, which entails hundreds of hours of time. The 2007 Festival was co-chaired by a young couple new to the neighborhood – Christiane & David Erwin. A core group of 35 volunteers has guided the festival each year, with up to 100 volunteers needed for the day itself.

These festivals have provided the base funding for the Wall of Welcome Project, which covers materials, firing costs and a stipend to Jean Graham, as artist, for more than 1,500 hours of labor. Additional donations have come from the Austin Friends of Folk Art and from a neighborhood initiatives award from the Bank of America. Each individual, family, or organization that made a tile, also donated a \$5, \$25 or \$100.



COMMUNITY INVOLVEMENT

The process of creating the Wall of Welcome has involved the participation of the neighborhood throughout its implementation. After interested people signed up to make a tile at the first Violet Crown Festival, Jean organized classes for groups to make & glaze clay pieces & set the mosaic to complete their tile. The North Austin Lions Club generously donated space for these classes, and some were held at Brentwood School or Jean Graham's home studio. Several people who were unable to access the classes were instructed in their homes to make sure that they could participate. Altogether there are 164 "individual" tiles on the wall, and each one took close to 10 hours to complete. The classes provided an opportunity for neighbors to meet each other and be engaged creatively in a way many of them never had. Neighborhood organizations that did tiles include 6 churches, the boy & girl scouts, fire station #16, the Optimists Club, Lions Club, Project Transitions, Sunshine Community Gardens, a Brentwood School class, Lamar Middle School, and McCallum High School. More than 250 individuals actively participated in making the individual tiles for the wall, though some paid extra to have Jean make a tile for them. During 2007, twenty large tiles were completed, and 80 small lavender tiles were done by people on the waiting list who had not been able to participate previously.

The Wall of Welcome was designed to be enjoyed by people passing by in their cars, as well as provide lots of details that can only be appreciated when you "walk the wall". The majority of the square footage includes larger images that portray the origins of the neighborhood – beginning with cotton fields and including one of the original houses, the drive-in theaters, and long-standing businesses such as the original Threadgills, which started as a gas station. Jean did extensive research at the Austin History Center and Susan Burneson compiled a first-

ever written history of the area that was presented at the Violet Crown Festivals. Long-time residents were interviewed, several people brought photographs, and many stopped by the wall during installation to tell stories and give anecdotal tidbits of information. Jean created all the large history sections for the mural in her neighborhood studio. The lavender ribbon that runs the length of the tile mural simulates the “violet crown” or the sunset over the western hills that was originally visible from the neighborhood and inspired O. Henry’s nickname for Austin in 1894. This ribbon is comprised of tiles that have quotes & factoids referring to the early days of the neighborhood, as well as small tiles made at the Violet Crown Festivals. Also placed along the wall are tile circles, still to be completed, with some engraved contextual information about Brentwood & Crestview. Combined with what is presented on the individual tiles, this makes the wall an educational experience for young and old.



IMPACT

The Wall of Welcome project has impacted the entire neighborhood. The many who have actively participated feel proud of what they have contributed, and a common accolade that people communicate as they walk or jog by is “Thank you! This is such a gift to the neighborhood and makes me feel pride!” The sense of neighborhood identity has blossomed, and the area has become a popular place for young couples to relocate. Many of the oldest residents have come by and clearly feel acknowledged by the project. Parents bring their children to view it, residents bring their out of town guests, and people who grew up in the neighborhood come back to view it. In a period of great expansion and transition in demographics, this project has provided a context and a sense of roots to residents.

The site has definitely been beautified and energized. The blank brick wall that used to inspire graffiti, has now been left alone – even when adjacent areas have been tagged. The wall has become a gathering spot, and some landscaping is planned, as well as the addition of some stones or benches for sitting and bollards to prevent damage by cars. Lighting is another improvement that is being discussed. To celebrate the completion of this community-wide project, a dedication is planned for March 29th of 2008. Included at the dedication will be a

short film documentation on the making of the wall, produced by a neighborhood filmmaker and also supported by Violet Crown Community Works.

Additional impact has been felt citywide from this project. KVUE news did a story, Jim Swift “Out on the Porch” featured the project, and Brad Buchholz wrote an extensive 2-page story in the *Austin American-Statesman* in March 2007. Many other groups have expressed an interest in finding out how such a project is accomplished. What is remarkable about this as a public art project is how it has successfully brought together groups of people in a neighborhood who have rallied to support it as a clear grass-roots effort. Relationships have been built across demographic groups and ages, and a culture of empowerment has been created in the neighborhood. Despite the inevitable burnout common to volunteer projects, a critical mass of people have stepped forward along the way to bring the Wall of Welcome project to fruition.



The Wall of Welcome: W.O.W.!! We did it!